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SISTER CLARE

Of all the many books about nuns—and life within the cloister—there has never been one quite like Sister Clare.

Written as a novel, here is the story of a Carmelite from the first day of her novitiate to her appointment, over thirty years later, as Holy Prioress. And if you think this theme must result in a serious, unexciting “religious” sort of work, you could not be more wrong. For this is indeed a book full of warmth, charm, humour and simple beauty, the like of which you have rarely encountered in a modern novel.

Nor is the appeal of this delightful book limited to any religious denomination. It is addressed to all who can appreciate a simple human story written with beautiful craftsmanship.

SISTER CLARE

A Novel by

LORETTA BURROUGH

with illustrations by

PAULINE BAYNES



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SISTER CLARE



TO
TERESA OF AVILA
AND
THERESE OF LISIEUX

I

HEARKEN,
O DAUGHTER, AND
SEE, AND INCLINE
THINE EAR: AND FORGET
THY PEOPLE AND THY
FATHER'S HOUSE.

Psalm 44:11





WAITING in the bleak, dark hall of the monastery, Jean listened intently for any sound from the other side of the locked cloister door.

Somewhere in that mysterious region a radiator hissed. Then she heard the mellow ripple of a gong; the Carmelites were being assembled to meet her—the new postulant about to enter.

There was a staccato rattle of beads from behind the door. With a rumble, the barrel turn in the wall opened, gaping darkly, and Sr. Rosaria's voice came through the thin wood of the turn. "Jean?"

"Yes, Sister." Jean picked up the new-smelling leather suitcase.

"Have your father and sister gone?"

"They've gone, Sister."

"Then I'll open the cloister door. Reverend Mother Teresa and the nuns are waiting for you in the community room. When I open the door, don't speak—just follow me. Are you ready?"

For a sudden, panic-stricken moment, like the moment of suspense at the top of a roller coaster before the car roars away with you in it, Jean did not feel ready at all. She was remembering her mother, who had spent last evening in such a pond of tears she could not bear to come today. "That horrible place behind high walls, that Carmelite prison—for a youngster like you—" she had wailed.

Jean hardened her grip on the handle of the suitcase. "Yes, Sister," she said. "I'm ready."

Bolt after bolt was drawn, a ponderous plucking of iron harp strings. Then the cloister door opened, and late afternoon sunlight, razor-sharp with springtime, romped into the gloomy hall.

A nun in a brown habit stood waiting, a black veil lowered to conceal half her face. Jean saw that the novice-mistress, whom she had expected to be tall, was in reality short and stout.

The door to Carmel was open. She stepped inside with her suitcase, and the bolts shot firmly behind her. In contrast to the chilly stumble-darkness of the outer part, the cloistered section of the monastery was warm and bright. Jean thought that if only her mother could see it she would feel better, perhaps; she would change that black picture of her unfortunate child, a living mole in a world of gloom.

As Sr. Rosaria's quiet, sandalled feet paced sedately into the unknown, Jean tried to mute the clicking of her high heels; in the monastery's silence, they sounded as out of place as a worldly laugh. Nearly on tiptoe, she followed the nun into the community room.

It was large, unornamented. On either side, facing each other, waited two long, motionless rows of Carmelites. Their lowered, concealing veils made them look inaccessible, out of reach. The only one whose veil was raised was the Prioress. A tall and handsome woman, smiling, she stood at the end of the

room beside a life-sized statue of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, whose serene head was crowned with golden stars.

With the air of one used to command, Reverend Mother Teresa came forward and held out her arms. "Welcome to Carmel," she said. "I wish you much joy!"

Embraced into a scent of immaculate wool and spotless linen, her head pressed down by a strong hand, Jean knelt for the blessing. Then Mother Teresa said gaily, "Now lift your veils, Sisters. Let the poor child know the worst!"

As though shutters went up, the veils were swooped high from laughing faces. Some of them were withered, time-dried as November leaves, and some were firm-fleshed and bright with youth, but Jean saw none clearly—you could not distinguish among a flock of birds. Old or young, something they had in common, a brimming look of happiness.

Down one line and up the other, Jean kissed soft cheeks, with the recital of the nuns' names and their voices repeating in an endless litany, "Welcome to Carmel!" "Oh, welcome to Carmel! I wish you much joy!"

When they had all greeted her, she felt as though she had come to the finish of a string of identical beads. She stood looking at them, in a confusion from which the Prioress rescued her smoothly.

"Sisters," she said, "did you know that today is Jean's birthday? She is sixteen today—just a year older than the Little Flower when *she* entered!"



At the bottom of one long line of brown habits—probably the equivalent of the lower end of the table—a young, enthusiastic voice said, “So Jean can be *our* Little Flower—our very own saint!”

Sr. Rosaria cast a squelching glance in the direction of the voice. “That’s rather ambitious,” she said dryly. “We shall see. But isn’t Jean’s mother good to give her to God on her birthday?”

“Now then, Jean,” Mother Teresa said, as though she felt talk of worldly mothers might be perilous, “Sister Rosaria will take your charity upstairs. Sister Mary Joseph and Sister Mary Agnes are so anxious to meet you—they’re waiting in the novitiate.”

“Yes, Reverend Mother.” Jean knew that it was the custom of Carmel, but still it was startling to be called “your charity”—as though you were a virtue, and not a person. Once again, she picked up her suitcase and followed Sr. Rosaria’s braided alpargats and white linen stockings.

When the door had been shut firmly behind her, from the community room sprang a burst of chatter that sounded very much like one of her mother’s bridge parties. She knew they were all holy women, and far above her on the tall ladder to Heaven, but it was comforting to find they were human, too—they were talking, as fast as they could get words out, about the new postulant.

An excited, wide-eyed stranger, Jean climbed, behind Sr. Rosaria’s swinging beads, into the silence of the monastery. At the top of the first winding flight rose another life-sized statue of the Virgin, standing in serenity, crowned with stars. Across the broad hall was a tiny room, filled with sunshine like a box, its door wedged open.

“Our Lady’s cell,” Sr. Rosaria said quietly. “Every Carmel keeps a cell furnished exactly like one of the nuns’ cells—for her.”

Almost as though she expected the swirl of blue robes, Jean looked in respectfully, but the little room held nothing except its simple furniture and that blaze of late sun.

They resumed their slow upward wind, past landings whose windows looked out on the paved cloister, with the dark earth of flower beds waiting to be planted, a lily pool, and a single plot of yellow daffodils. Landing by landing, the daffodils lost their form, until at last they were nothing but a butter-coloured smudge far below.

At the top of the final flight, Sr. Rosaria paused, with a gusty breath. "Well, here we are!" Opening a door, she said, "The novitiate, Jean."

Jean was getting used to the stern plainness of Carmel. The novitiate was small, its only furniture a few straight-backed wooden chairs, a fatherly statue of St. Joseph—and two beaming young Carmelites. One wearing a black veil, the other a white, they stood waiting, their hands thrust out of sight beneath long, brown scapulars.

"For a week," Sr. Rosaria said crisply, "they have been just good for nothing—sky-high because you were coming. Sister Mary Joseph, Sister Mary Agnes, here is Jean at last!"

"Oh, welcome to Carmel!" they cried, and embraced her with the eagerness of friendly puppies.

Because there were only two of them, she sorted them out at once. Sr. Mary Joseph, the choir novice in the black veil, was pretty, pencil-slender, steaming with suppressed vitality. Sr. Mary Agnes, the white-veiled lay novice, had a plain, kind, practical-eyed young face, a sturdy, practical body. At the moment, both of them, wordless, sparkling, stared at her in silence.

"Well, what happened to all the things you had to say?" Sr. Rosaria laughed. "But you can get it out later—it's time for

Jean to change into her postulant's dress. Mary Joseph, you haven't lost her charity's cap?"

"Oh, no, Sister!" Sr. Mary Joseph dived at a little box, scratched through tissue paper like a chicken in straw, and emerged with a black net cap that streamed wide grosgrain ribbons.

"Come along, Jean." Sr. Rosaria picked up the suitcase and closed the novitiate door. Immediately, behind it, there was a soft babble as of discreet mice; like the community room, the novitiate was commenting on the new postulant. Sr. Rosaria smiled, preceded Jean along the wide hall, and opened another of the many doors. "This is your cell, Jean," she said.

The tiny room had only one window, covered with yellow and green glazed paper, through which the sunlight filtered onto bare, immaculate floorboards. A black wooden cross hung upon the wall. There was a low pallet with a brown cloth cover, a straight-backed wooden chair, an unpainted chest of drawers, scrubbed to the whiteness of bone. Beside the chest of drawers a tin water pail sat on a folded brown mat, with a toothbrush mug and a soap dish holding a healthy-looking cake of red soap. There was no rug, no curtains on the curious window, and no mirror. It had the starkness of a plain pine coffin.

Sr. Rosaria glanced at her shrewdly. "What does your charity think of it?" she said.

The sisters at Jean's school, members of a teaching order, had warned her to be truthful with the novice-mistress—because all novice-mistresses could see through stone walls with ease. So Jean said, honestly, "It's *different*, Sister."

Sr. Rosaria laughed. For a moment she appeared to gaze far off, into distant, worldly memories. "Very—different," she said. "But soon you'll get used to it—and soon you'll love it. Now here is your cap. Change into your postulant's dress, and I'll be back in a little while."

Left alone, Jean laid her suitcase on the low, hard bed, un-snapped stiff new catches, and took out the postulant's brown dress, her night things, comb, brush, toothbrush, and last of all the small travelling clock Mother had given her. This morning her mother had wound and set it, still pleading as she held it, "Why must you throw away everything to enter this awful life? Oh, I can't understand it!"

But Jean could not understand it herself. What had it been like at first? Just an insistent voice calling, so far away it could barely be heard—then it had become nearer and louder, louder and nearer, until the whole world had seemed to thunder with her name.

The little clock was ticking like a living thing in her hands. Thinking of her mother, Jean, with a guilty look, set it down on the chest of drawers, then changed into the postulant's dress and short brown cape. Almost blind without a mirror's guidance, she put on the black net cap and did her best with its baffling ribbons. Finished, her worldly clothes folded and looking as out of place here as a clown in church, she sat down on the hard chair and waited.

No one came. She tried to pray, but she was too excited and new for prayer to come easily—and unwanted thoughts of home kept slipping into her mind, like hands pulling at her. After a long while, when the tiny room was greying with dusk, a floorboard outside her door creaked and there was an authoritative rap on the panel. Sr. Rosaria entered.

"Well, all dressed!" she said. "It's nearly suppertime now, so Sr. Mary Joseph will take your charity downstairs." Her bright sharp eyes touched the clock on the chest of drawers. "What a pretty clock!" Picking it up, she snapped it shut with firm fingers, smothering the cheerful tick. "Much too nice to be broken." The clock remained in Sr. Rosaria's hand.

A small grief in her heart, Jean bade it goodbye—she

supposed it was too worldly. At this moment, with a preparatory, asthmatic wheeze, the grandfather's clock on the floor below began to chime, dropping through the silent monastery six liquid silver strokes.

At once, a door banged open nearby. Panicky-sounding footsteps bounded across the landing and raced down the stairs. In a few moments came an urgent *clang, clang, clang* as the great bell began to sound the first notes of the Angelus.

With a despairing look above her, Sr. Rosaria shook her head, then bowed to pray. The tolling, from the belfry directly over them, was deafening. It beat about them like wild birds, stunning their ears for minutes before it finally, mercifully, stopped.

The battered air was still trembling as the same footsteps hurried up the stairs again, and a voice panted nearer, loud in prayer, "August Queen of Heaven, Sovereign Mistress of the Angels—" Then came a rapping on the door, and a breathless "*Benedicamus Domino.*"

With a frown and lowered brows, Sr. Rosaria responded, "*Deo gratias.*" She opened the door on a smiling Sr. Mary Joseph, cherry-red from her exertions.

"Is Jean ready for her supper yet, Sister?" the novice asked.

"She is—you may take her downstairs. But I have something to say to you first. Once again, your charity was late ringing the Angelus. Moreover, the Angelus bell summons one to pray, not to put out a fire." Small, plump, ruler-straight, Sr. Rosaria gazed sternly at the young novice. "You nearly brought the roof down on us. If this is your idea of good religious deportment to show a new postulant, I am *not* in agreement."

Mary Joseph bowed so humbly that her long brown scapular rippled like water over her braided sandals. "I will try to do better, Sister," she murmured.

"If I were you, I would. You haven't made your final profession. You can still be sent home, you know." The mistress nodded a chastening dismissal.

In subdued silence, Mary Joseph and Jean started off, the novice walking at a pace that displayed the purest of religious deportment. As they crossed the landing she began to say softly, "August Queen of Heaven, Sovereign Mistress of the Angels, thou who from the beginning hast received from God the power and mission to crush the head of Satan, we humbly beseech thee to send thy holy legions—"

The prayer, repeated over and over, accompanied them like a murmuring wheel as they wound down through the quiet monastery, down to the main floor, down a basement stairway, to a door. When Mary Joseph pushed open the door, a hot, good smell of fresh-baked bread rushed out to meet them.

Jean took a deep, pleased breath. At home today, even though Mother had seen that the cook fixed everything Jean liked best, she had been too excited to eat. Now she knew that she was very hungry.

They were in a dim box of a hall, lighted only by the gold and blue flame of a single hissing gas jet. It shone on a spotless wooden table set with a big pitcher of milk, a mug, several covered bowls, a plate of butter, and a formidable pile of thick-sliced fresh bread. On the wall was a statue of the Infant of Prague, holding the round ball of the world in His hand.

"Here we are!" Mary Joseph whirled out the only chair with a flourish. "Sit down, Jean."

Jean placed herself obediently, facing the wall. Directly before her was a large towel, like a roller towel, partly folded. On the unfolded section sat a wooden plate, a wooden fork and spoon.

"Now let me show your charity," Sister Mary Joseph said.

Sweeping back the wide sleeves of her habit, she whipped the towel open deftly and pinned it up on Jean's shoulders. "This is your napkin."

"It looks like a towel," Jean said. "Or a bib."

"It's a napkin," Mary Joseph corrected.

If the Carmelites said so, it was. Jean picked up the wooden spoon with a doubtful glance—it felt as clumsy in her unaccustomed hand as a bat—and took a piece of the soft-textured bread.

"Now just a minute!" Mary Joseph said. "You've forgotten to say grace." A reminiscent gleam snapping in her dark eyes, she added, "Is *that* religious deportment?"

At home they didn't say grace before meals, but Jean was not going to betray her parents—Mary Joseph might think they were heathens. So she bowed her head and murmured reverently for a long moment, while Mary Joseph uncovered the bowls—steaming soup, stewed tomatoes, fried potatoes, grapefruit snow-covered with whipped cream.

"I'll be back for your charity in a little while." Mary Joseph looked over the laden table. "And you'd better eat everything," she warned. "They won't like it if you don't. A picky appetite's a sure sign of no vocation."

With an encouraging pat on the shoulder she was gone, and the cheerful singsong of "August Queen" flowed once more up the stairs and faded away into the distances of the convent.

Although the last dozen mouthfuls were difficult, Jean managed to finish all the food. She would certainly be able to write Mother, who thought, among other things, that the Carmelites starved, that she was wrong. Her napkin-towel unpinned and folded, the dishes neatly stacked, she waited.

How quiet a monastery was! Except for the occasional iron ring of a stove lid and the patter of even-paced footsteps behind a closed door which must lead to the kitchen, there was

not a sound. No telephone bell jangled, no gramophone or piano pounded jazz, no uncontrolled voice shrilled—the noises that filled the world with the clashings of a battlefield were gone.

Because she was unused to it, this ocean-deep of silence made her uneasy after a while, and she welcomed the bright approaching murmur of “August Queen.” In a few moments, the door flashed open and Mary Joseph came in.

“Oh, very good,” she said, looking approvingly at the empty dishes. “They’ll *like* that. So far, you’ve got a vocation. Now, I’m to take your charity out into the garden until Reverend Mother calls you. Wash your hands, then come along.”

Jean dabbled her fingers hastily at the sink in the corner and hurried after her fast-moving guide, who led her up to the community room. She remembered it filled with brown habits greeting her just a few hours ago, but now only two rows of empty chairs gaped at each other in the dusk.

They stepped through a long window, on to the porch. As they went down its worn wooden steps, there was a hasty flurry and a short, stout Carmelite scuttled out of sight around the corner of the house, like a startled beetle.

Perplexed, Jean said, “She ran away from us?”

“It’s Canon Law.” Mary Joseph was a little complacent over her extra knowledge. “The professed nuns aren’t allowed to have anything to do with the novices or postulants. That’s why I say the ‘August Queen’ all the time, so they’ll know a novice is coming and get out of the way. Though they don’t really avoid me any more, because I’ll take my final vows so soon.” Her pace became more sedate, as though she felt her coming profession a halo upon her. “But you’re only a postulant—they’ve *got* to run from you.”

Jean supposed that was because she was so fresh from the world its enticements still clung to her, a dangerous perfume.

brainless family in a maternal voice, "Here, chick, chick, chick—bedtime!" as she shooed them up the run to the hen house.

Jean dipped her pen into the ink, remembering last night when she had wakened suddenly at the light touch of her mother's hand. Mother had whispered, "I'm sorry I woke you—I just came in to see that you were all right."

Oh, poor Mother, Jean thought. She did indeed want to write the sort of warm, cheering letter the Prioress had ordered, but words slithered away from her as though they were drops of mercury. As the light faded, she kept grating the pen in and out of the well, until her fingers were darkened with ink; after looking in vain for a blotter, she blotted them on the side of her plain black shoe.



From the room below came a clatter of dishes—the community was at supper. A slanting block of light from the refectory window poured over the stone walk in the garden—the shadow of a nun, carrying a shadow platter, crossed the patch of light. Now the jingle of dishes stopped, and she heard the steady murmur of someone reading aloud.

At this moment, Sr. Mary Joseph opened the door and peered in. "Your charity's not finished yet? Hurry up—the postman will be here any minute. And so will Reverend Mother!"

Under that urging, Jean wrote quickly, "I have no regular duties at present, and will spend most of my time in the garden, taking care of the flowers." What flowers? she wondered—well, there *were* daffodils. "You know I send you all my love." Even though her writing was large, that message covered only a few inches of the long page, and vacancy yawned below it. She filled the emptiness with names and more names, to whom she sent love, then folded the sheet, unhappy; when Mother got this, she would be bound to feel worse, not better.

Heralded by a swift rattle of beads, the Prioress came in. "Finished? That's a good child." She took the note to the window and read it, with a gathering frown. "This is mostly names," she commented, and added, her voice dry, "Surely you can't love *all* these people? Well, you'll write again tomorrow—and you'll have to do better. Now I'll take you to choir—that is what we call the chapel, in Carmel."

Her cheeks hot with the crisp rebuke, Jean followed the Prioress across the empty, gas-lit hall, into the dark chapel with its wax- and incense-tasting air.

It was like no chapel she had ever seen, but then nothing was quite like anything else, in Carmel. Facing each other were two long, straight-backed, comfortless wooden benches. There was no altar. That was in the lay people's chapel, separated from the nuns' part by a grating and thin black curtain, through which the Carmelites could see but the world could not. For furnishing, beside the benches, and three chairs—for prioress, sub-prioress, and Our Lady of Mount Carmel—there were two statues with blue vigil lights; that was all. And yet the room's unadorned nakedness was sweetened by something—perhaps the invisible flower of Carmelite prayer.

"Kneel down, Jean," Reverend Mother said quietly, "and offer yourself to Him."

Jean went to her knees on the glassy, immaculate floor. Once

again, she felt too confused to pray. There was nothing in her mind but the nagging memory of that stiff, silly note Mother would open so eagerly in the morning. -

Soon the Prioress rose, tapped Jean's shoulder, and led her back to the community room. "Wait here, child," she said. "Sister Rosaria will come to take you up to bed." Closing the door solidly, Reverend Mother left Jean in the gathering dark.

At once, in the hall outside, there was a great rattling of beads and the busy surge of many footsteps as the nuns filed by the closed door, into the choir. Apparently they had been waiting for her to be swept out of their way. Someone coughed, then in the chapel began a quiet, tidal ebb and flow of murmuring voices. When the prayers ended, there was nothing but a deep silence, so deep and pervasive that it seemed to fill the monastery, from its cellars to the high belfry; there was not even that human, comforting cough to hear.

Jean stood at the window, looking out into the moonlit garden. The moon brightness was a chilly light, and the arches of the cloister were black with cold shadow. Had they forgotten her? She was such a new and unimportant addition to Carmel's history of a thousand years that they might well *have* forgotten her. What were they doing at home? Obliterating the shadow and chill of the cloister garden, home sprang into being before her—brightly lighted, full of voices and laughter, warm as a nest. She heard her mother, saying her name as clearly as though she stood beside Jean.

The moonlight in the garden splintered suddenly into a pale fog; ashamed, she groped for her handkerchief. *This* was where she wanted to be, not home. Why should she cry now, when she had not cried once in these past months?—months when she had had to battle them all for her vocation, from her bitterly unwilling parents to that doubting Thomas of a bishop. But

she could not stop crying—it was as though the tears came not from her, but from some stranger, soft and unreconciled.

The door opened, and a shapeless, faceless form looked in. "My goodness, the poor child's been left in the pitch-dark!" The startled voice was Sr. Rosaria's. "It's bedtime, Jean—come along."

With the mistress in the lead, once again they climbed the long flight of stairs, Jean dabbing her eyes dry behind Sr. Rosaria's back.

The only light on the top floor was a red vigil lamp pulsing before the Virgin's statue. As Sr. Rosaria passed this, she dipped a slim taper into the flame, and bore its torch to the gas jet in Jean's cell; someone had already closed the shutters.

"Now—" Like a general marshalling a tiny army, the mistress glanced around the bare little room. "You have everything, Jean?"

Jean kept her face turned carefully away. "Yes, Sister." From a hook behind the door she lifted her nightgown, so new the sleeves still held their store creases.

"Here is the veil your charity will wear to Mass tomorrow." The novice-mistress took a folded white veil from the top of the chest, and Jean was obliged to look around. "Tomorrow morning Sister Mary Joseph will show you how to put it on. Don't get up until she knocks, and pay no attention to the bells you will hear ringing—they're not for you." Her attentive brown eyes gazed narrowly at Jean. "Good night."

"Good night, Sister." Jean felt her face contrive an unnatural smile.

"Of course you're homesick," the Carmelite said gently. "We all go through it—even our Prioress was homesick, at first." She gave Jean's shoulder a firmly comforting pat. "Don't worry—your *real* home is here. Now, good night." With a rustle of sandals, a clicking of beads, she was gone.

Sr. Rosaria had said they all went through it, like an illness, and even the Prioress had been homesick. Surely not the Prioress, who had looked to Jean as though she had been born in Carmelite robes? Hardly comforted, she undressed, and journeyed down the chilly hall to the novices' bathroom, with its ominous old-fashioned tub—ominous, because a cold dip every day in its spacious interior was part of the Rule.

Sr. Rosaria had, perhaps, reassured her a little, but not nearly enough. Even when she was back in her cell, kneeling beside the straw mattress to say her prayers, she could not convince herself of belonging. Had the portly bishop, that unyielding fortress for so long, been right? He had said, "You're too young. And a romantic child—you're having a dream of being a pink-candy saint." The hardness of the straw mattress under her clasped hands seemed to be saying that Carmel's dedicated sternness was *not* for children.

Hopeless at last of her prayers going anywhere except in a muddled spiral around this tiny room, she got up from her knees. She turned out the gas, pushed up the window, and opened the rattling shutters.

The vacant April boughs, the straight flagstone paths, the grape arbour, the sleeping hen house with its feathered Carmelites, the patch of daffodils, and the apple tree had been dipped in silver and silence. Nothing moved, or complained, or suffered, in that peace. As she looked out at it, it seemed to enclose her slowly, as though it were folding wings. Her cheeks, still hot with the washed-off tears, grew cooler, her hands on the window sill less tense. She felt her straining nerves begin to quiet, begin to grow as quiet as the great bulk of the monastery about her. High in the building as she was, there seemed to be nothing between her and the sky, its blazing moon-washed blue, its great white clouds that trundled slowly across it.

Yet, beyond the tall monastery walls, the city was still there,

the city where she had lived until today. Listening intently, she heard its muffled hum, like that of a worried hive—she saw that its lights, under the white clouds and stainless moonlight, were drugged and dim.

Suddenly she remembered that the apartment house, outside the convent wall, was considered a distraction. If one apartment house was a distraction, what must they think of a whole feverish city? She turned back into her cell in haste, took off her slippers—when the Carmelites saw the gay worldly pompons on their toes, she knew *they* would disappear—and got into the strange bed.

The straw smelled fresh as sweet grass and crackled in small explosions under her weight, but it had a comfort she would never have guessed. Lying on her back in the tiny, moonlit room, she heard the premonitory whack of a bell rope, then, from within the monastery, a bell began to clang. It must be time for the Night Office.

The bell was not calling her, she knew, but one day it would. My Lord Bishop, she thought, you are wrong—my home *is* here. Slowly, the clear notes dropped into silence. Secure as the pearl in the enclosing flesh of the oyster, as the living seed in the oaken walls of the acorn, she slept.



From the belfry above her, a deafening tolling woke Jean—the little room was pounded by sound as the Angelus rang out over the city. Faint light thinned the darkness, and the air had

the cool sting of morning. As the reverberations of the bell wallowed into echoes, the birds in the cloister garden began to wake; drowsy, tentative chirps and whistles sparkled outside her window.

The homesickness of the night before had gone with the night. Wide-eyed, she lay waiting, eager for her cell to appear around her. She was here in Carmel; she was at the foot of the high white mountain; her first day in Carmel was about to begin. The thought of it made her want to bound out of bed and dance on the floor—but she knew better than that. Instead, she prayed for her family, surrounding them with love—the tall, lively man, the warm woman, the impudent little sister. Don't miss me, she thought, from her lofty eminence, her Carmelite height—and then laughed, because how angry she would be if the family didn't miss her! Impatient, she turned on her elbow and stared at the door. Was everybody in the monastery dead? Only the dead could fail to hear that bell.

The floorboard outside the cell gave its mouselike squeak; there was a quick tap at the door, and a ghostly form that must have been Mary Joseph slipped inside, a warning finger at her lips—it was the time of the Great Silence. She put a small bench down, gave Jean a note, and disappeared again.

Clutching the scrap of paper as though it were some priceless ticket, Jean jumped out of bed. At the dim grey light of the window, she pulled the words toward her: *Dress quickly. I will be back to take you to Mass. Wear the white veil and bring the bench.*

Wearing the white veil, and carrying the small bench, Jean followed Mary Joseph into the dim choir; it was fragrant with its perpetual blending of old incense and new wax. As she had been warned, to protect the glossy floor she wore her bedroom slippers, since she had no alpargats. Excited at being with the nuns, at being allowed to belong, she attempted to see everything without appearing to stare.

The first thin morning light, spreading through the windows at the back, showed her two long rows of dark-robed Carmelites. They were facing the altar, which was invisible behind the shut grating that closed off the front of the choir. Silent, motionless as images, their heavy robes tucked under their ankles, they were sitting back on their haunches, in meditation. Because Jean's lighter clothing would make such a position unbearable, she had been given the bench. Not, she thought as she carried it, that they were exactly pampering her; it was too small and its edges sharp as polished steel.

Mary Joseph led Jean to her place, on the left side of the choir. It was a niche between the front wall and the back of one of the long benches—a space so small she had to fit herself and the stool in it. She was surrounded on three sides, by the wall, the curtained grating, and the bench; on her right was the open space of the choir, with its absorbed Carmelites behind her, its swelling light of day.

She sat motionless, her senses once again tuned so high with excitement that she could not concentrate on prayer. After all, the Lord could not mind if on the first day in His house, she was a little distracted—because His house was certainly a strange one. She longed to stare about, to study the nuns in their extraordinary position, to look at their faces, possibly to detect among them someone in saintly transport. And she had a practical curiosity about the way the shuttered and veiled grating worked—she would have liked to get up and examine it. I am in choir, she said to herself sternly, and quieted her tumbling thoughts.

From the rear of the room came three sharp taps against wood. Clearly a familiar signal, at once there was a rustling and shifting, as of birds stirring in their nests, and the nuns rose to their feet.

Was *she* supposed to do anything? Jean turned, but the signal

had not been meant for her. The standing Carmelites were fastening their cloaks, long white mantles, beautiful and graceful, that nearly reached the floor—mantles so white that the shadowy choir grew brighter with their unfolding.

She faced front again at once; Jean did not want them to think she was idly curious, or regarded them as a spectacle—but it had been a lovely one, like the flowering of angels. She wished that she too had a handsome white choir mantle instead of just a scrap of veil that kept slipping about on her head because the single pin she had been given did not anchor it firmly; Carmelite poverty probably meant that where several pins were necessary, one would do just as well.

From the lay chapel on the other side of the grating came a man's voice, reverent, thin with age, ponderously slow, as the priest began the Mass with the familiar Latin words, "*In Nomine Patris et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti—*"

Her hands clasped, Jean knelt upright. Although the altar was invisible, she knew the set portions and responses by heart, and could follow the quiet ritual of the Mass perfectly. For her, it was a Mass of great thanksgiving—she had fought her way past family opposition, reluctant bishop, doubtful Carmelites, and was safely behind the inner door.

At the Sanctus, she heard the window shutters in the rear of the nun's chapel closing, and at once the choir darkened. Then Sr. Rosaria opened the shutters over the grating, and the nuns moved quietly to the middle of the room. Through the frail black curtain that shielded them from the curious, they could now see into the bright lay chapel.

Jean had been told about this, so she too padded over, cautious on the unworn soles of her new slippers, and knelt before the grating. As on a stage, in the illumination of gaslight and candles, she saw the old priest at the altar, an ancient bird of paradise in his gorgeous vestments. Hunched over in the pews

were a few shabby, elderly women, like sparrows of God.

Beside Jean knelt Mary Joseph and Mary Agnes. Sr. Rosaria, holding a tiny bell hushed in her hand, was at their right, the rest of the community behind them.

As the moment for Communion approached, a silvery warning from Sr. Rosaria's bell sprinkled the air, and the nuns stirred and rustled. Mary Joseph nudged Jean. Gracefully, the novice was lowering her black veil so that it concealed the upper half of her face. Although it was so insecure she hardly dared meddle with it, Jean lowered her own veil.

At another signal the nuns stood, and the choir hissed with soft footsteps as the Carmelites followed their prioress, in order of seniority, to the long step. There, as they knelt one by one, through a small door in the wall the priest's ancient hand would give each Communion.

Jean felt herself pushed firmly into line. She groped forward; the choir was so dark she could barely make out the hems of the white mantles, moving in snowy circles ahead of her. Unprepared, when the line stopped for a moment, Jean bumped into Mary Joseph, who gave a low indignant hiss, like a stepped-on snake. Tilting her head to see better where she was going, Jean felt her veil slither off. She made a futile clutch for it; behind her, Mary Agnes tried to catch it, but, as though it had eyes, it eluded them both and sailed, a white butterfly, to the floor. From what seemed weltering hundreds of mantles and alpagats, Jean snatched it up and pinned it once more on her head. Nearby she heard a muted, but sternly disapproving "Tck-tck, tck-tck."

Jean's face flamed as she made her way back to her place after Communion; she was grateful she was hidden by the treacherous veil. Wanting to become as inconspicuous as possible, as soon as possible, she knelt too quickly; her knee, touching the small bench, sent it skipping as though electrified

out into the middle of the floor. For an appallingly long moment it whirled like a water bug, noisy as a clog dancer, in the prayerful silence of the choir. Should she get it? Should she leave it? It stared at her, conspicuous as a clown where it ought not to be, so she got up, retrieved the bench, and carried it back to her place in despair. This time no sound had come from Sr. Rosaria, and Jean knew why—the crime was too terrible.

Appalled by her misfortunes Jean knelt there, while the familiar words of the Mass flowed on, unheard. Once, before she had entered, Sr. Rosaria had said to her, half playful, half concerned, "But what will a little colt of a child do to the peace of Carmel?" Sr. Rosaria had found out.



But presently, as nothing further happened to her, as no one tapped her shoulder and told her to leave at once, she drew a deep relaxing breath. After all, she *was* here in Carmel. God had called her, so He must want her. Hopefully, she began to think that Sr. Rosaria would forgive her; perhaps she might not even mention Jean's spectacular debut in choir.

When Mass was ended, the novice-mistress closed the shutters over the grating with a rush of air and a snapping of latches. As she went past Jean, she turned her head, looked at

her, and beckoned. Something in the look told Jean she had been too optimistic.

Obediently, but slowly, her feet lagged out to where Sr. Rosaria, standing in the hall, was folding her choir mantle. Once more her curved finger beckoned Jean, this time into a doorway. "The corridors are always places of strict silence," she said in explanation. "If you must speak to someone, you speak in a doorway."

That was no stranger than anything else, Jean thought, watching Sr. Rosaria's blunt, skilful hands folding the mantle. Should she apologize about the confusion in chapel, or would that be making herself too important? A Carmelite was supposed to be as little and plain as a sparrow. Alarmed, she stood looking at Sr. Rosaria. Last night the nun had been comforting, kind, but that was last night—and the novice-mistress had never been too enthusiastic about turning Carmel into a nursery, as she had put it. It was true that last night she had said Jean's home was here, but what did she think this morning? Wanting to understand her, Jean gazed at her hopelessly. Sr. Rosaria's stern, inscrutable, middle-aged face was as beyond the reach of Jean's sixteen years as Everest.

"Now then—" she began. She laid the cloak, folded to her satisfaction, over her arm and looked at Jean. "A religious has her mind *and* body completely under control. She does not throw furniture about in choir." She shook her head, as though Jean's possessed little bench was racketing again in her ears. "You were a terrible distraction to the nuns. How could they pray, with you tumbling around in front of them? And what happened to your veil?"

"It fell off," Jean said feebly. "I think I need two pins."

"Twenty-two pins would be preferable to *that* commotion." Her voice was dry, as unsmiling as her face; her tart humour did not seek to amuse. "Do you understand, child? I'm stern .

because you must learn at once this is a stern life—you are expected to measure up to an angelic standard. Don't you think the world was easier?"

Looking into Sr. Rosaria's formidable eyes, Jean thought the world was indeed easier—a sunny place of comfort, laughter, pleasure, of schoolbooks easily mastered, people easily pleased. She felt hungry for her breakfast, and discouraged, but she said, "I don't *want* the world."

The novice-mistress' face did not soften exactly, but it changed for the better. "Well, we shall see—but you will have to improve on today's performance tomorrow! Mary Joseph will take you to breakfast now, and then she will spend the morning and afternoon in your cell with you. That's most unusual, because always it is strict silence in the cells, and no nun is ever allowed to enter another's without special permission—but for a postulant's first day, the rule is suspended. That is so you can familiarize yourself with the life by asking her questions." Sr. Rosaria paused. "You understand?"

To be able to talk all day to someone neither terribly old nor terribly holy, to escape Sr. Rosaria's razor-edged yardstick, was an enchanting prospect. She had questions for Mary Joseph all right, thousands of them.

"Well, I'll see you later," the novice-mistress said, and her commanding handclap at once materialized Mary Joseph from somewhere nearby, like a jinni.

The hot afternoon sun, packed in the little cell as in a box, was merciless. Jean sat on the rigid edge of her brown-covered pallet and perspired uncomplainingly. She would have liked to take off her postulant's cap with its smothering ribbons and pull her long dress up to her knees, but she had expected hardships in the Carmelite life and did not intend to start by dodging them. Besides, she could not imagine a Carmelite with her

dress up to her knees, not ever. She looked at Mary Joseph. Sitting opposite Jean in the straight-backed chair and dexterous as a spider fashioning a web, she was stitching tiny silver reliquaries.

"Everybody works in Carmel?" Jean said. She had had a wonderful morning with Mary Joseph; she had combed her for information, like someone hoeing a vegetable patch, and had turned up some rich potatoes. Jean had got far more out of her than she ever had from books about Carmelite life; written mostly for the elevation of the laity, they seemed to Jean more pious than practical. But she did not know nearly enough yet. Even though it was like holding a conversation on the grid of a fiery furnace, she looked forward to the rest of the afternoon. "Everybody?"

"Everybody. It's in the Rule: '—you shall do some kind of work, that the devil may always find you occupied.' We make and embroider vestments, bake altar breads for parish churches, decorate missals and prayer cards, do little reliquaries like these—other things. And of course, we're our own servants. We cook, clean, keep chickens for their eggs, raise vegetables. Mrs. Phelps does the external work for the convent, but we do everything else." Her handsome eyes lowered, Mary Joseph continued her delicate sewing. If she found Jean's steady quizzing rather like the maternal ordeal of being shut up with a child's incessant questions, her patience did not show it. "We even make our own habits."

"Oh, *no!*" Jean cried.

Mary Joseph looked amused. "Did you think we went shopping for them? But Sister Elias is a wonderful seamstress—when she's allowed to be. Of course, if Reverend Mother detects any temptation to worldly vanity in a sister, that sister *may* get a habit that's a frightful fit."

Entertained by this glimpse of how heaven and earth were

blended, Jean rocked with easy laughter. She had loved clothes, choosing them, peacocking in them. She had loved looking into a mirror's flattering face. If she weren't careful, Sr. Elias' guided shears could slash out a horror for her. "This is a wonderfully wacky place," she said, as at ease with Mary Joseph as though she were one of her school friends. "What will I do?"

"What *can* you do?" Mary Joseph asked practically. She added the finished reliquary to the little pile, testimony to her long hours of conversation.

Jean looked humbly at the beautiful silver things. "Nothing so lovely as those," she said. "I sing. And we had a band in school—I can play a saxophone."

"You can forget about that!" Mary Joseph said firmly. "No musical instruments. We do sing, of course—plain chant in choir."

Everything of the plainest, Jean thought. But wasn't that what she had come for? She had found the extravagant richness of the world not enough. She pondered a moment. If Mary Joseph did not think much of song and a saxophone, neither would Sr. Rosaria. "Well," she said, "I did do volunteer work in a hospital. I could give back rubs or bed baths—but everybody here looks very healthy. Besides, I don't know much about taking care of women—I worked in a men's ward."

Mary Joseph's hands that had been so calm and deft, suddenly fluttered like agitated butterflies. "You *did*!" Her dark eyes expanded with shock. "You gave *men* baths!"

At this evidence that Mary Joseph was prissy, the imp of the perverse possessed Jean. The junior volunteers were never allowed to bathe male patients, and the only bath she had ever attempted to give a man had come about as the result of a mistaken order—she could well remember that Mr. Johnson's howls of outraged modesty had brought a proper nurse to his

rescue at once. To her rescue, too—she could also remember that the hairiness of the arm she had begun to wash had startled her. Recalling those things, she said innocently, "Aren't we all the same in God's eyes?"

"Yes, of course," Mary Joseph said, obviously doubting it. Her look at Jean questioning, as though she thought her companion knew too much of Adam, she added stiffly, "There'll be no work of that sort for you in *this* monastery."

Knuckles rapped on the door panel, and outside someone said, "*Benedicamus Domino.*"

"Oh *please* come in," Jean said, with hospitable warmth.

"Rosaria," Mary Joseph murmured very low, adding in a loud voice, "*Deo gratias.*" They both leaped to their feet.

Sr. Rosaria entered, breathing audibly from her climb, and carrying an armful of white wool blankets. "Never say 'come in,' Jean," she admonished. "Social prattle is out of place here. The correct response is '*Deo gratias*.'" But her instructions, although celery-crisp, were absent-minded—she was looking over the hot little cell with a barracks-inspecting air. "Who made the bed? It's very good."

"*Jean* did," Mary Joseph said, like a hen proud of a promising chick. "She'd worked as a junior volunteer in a hospital, and made a lot of them. Imagine, Sister, she even gave baths to *men!*"

Mary Joseph must really have been raised in layers of petticoats, Jean thought. She wished that she had kept to herself that one arm of Mr. Johnson, because, for a moment, even Sr. Rosaria looked taken aback.

"Mary Joseph," Sr. Rosaria said firmly, "you are supposed to be explaining to Jean the life *here*. You are not supposed to be listening to her explain the life *outside*."

"Yes, Sister," Mary Joseph said, deflating visibly.

"Now, Jean—" Pointing Jean down onto the neatly made

bed, Sr. Rosaria laid one of the blankets across her knees. "These blankets your mother sent with you are lovely, but much too grand for Carmel—I want you to rip off the rose satin bindings. While you're about it, be sure to take those fancy doodads off your bedroom slippers."

Jean was not surprised the pompons were going. "Yes, Sister," she said.

"Mary Joseph—" Sr. Rosaria paused in the doorway. "Keep the conversation edifying!"

After a safe interval, Jean observed, "I like Sister Rosaria." The white blanket lay on her lap, warm and heavy as a polar bear. "Though she *does* remind me of a drill sergeant."

"Not an edifying conversation," Mary Joseph observed gloomily. "And you'd better start snipping. Don't nick it, or you'll wish you hadn't."

Jean picked up the scissors and began on the rose satin binding; it felt elegant, expensive, worldly under her fingers. She searched about in her mind—there was so much more she wanted to know. "Well," she said, "tell me, who are the saints here?" That was certainly an edifying topic.

"Oh, they're *all* good women," Mary Joseph said, sounding shocked again.

"Naturally, or they wouldn't be here," Jean said, feeling a little impatient with Mary Joseph. "But I mean saints like our holy foundress, Teresa. Or like the Little Flower."

Mary Joseph took out an enormous tan handkerchief and sponged her face with it, as though she was beginning to find the afternoon trying. "I'll be glad to get my bath. And change into a fresh tunic—they're those long white wool things that we wear under our habits." She glanced at the closed door, as though she would also be glad to part from her tireless questioner. "You see them hanging on the line back of the kitchen. We're given two of them a week, and they're aired

every day—but even so, in hot weather, they can get rather—” She left how they could get, to the imagination.

Jean, who had thought they were just peculiar-looking night-gowns, deposited tunics in her store of information. “I suppose so,” she said. “One of the sisters I met yesterday—a kitchen sister, I guess—smelled exactly like a pan of fried potatoes.” She took out her own plain white handkerchief and blotted her upper lip; the small cell was accumulating heat as though it were a lighted oven. “But the saints—” she persisted, well aware that Mary Joseph had dodged her with tunics, “nobody *looks* very saintly, but there ought to be some. Who are they?”

Mary Joseph sighed, and folded defeated hands in her brown lap. “Perhaps Mother Chrysostom—that’s Mother Sub-Prioress. She’s a mystic, and *no* one knows her very well—Reverend Mother says that’s because she’s so close to God there’s no room for anyone else. But when Mother Chrysostom speaks, how they all listen!” Her fingers touched a patched spot on the knee of her habit, as though her thoughts of Mother Chrysostom inclined her to her knees. “And then there’s Sister Magdalen—she’s in charge of the kitchen. I’m sure *she’s* a saint. She was a choir nun, but they needed a lay sister, so she asked to work as one—to be little and necessary, she said.”

Sr. Magdalen, if she were in charge of the kitchen, might well have been the nun who had smelled of fried potatoes. A saint might have been cooking and carrying dishes for *her*, and been laughed at by *her*. Looking at herself in the sudden white glare of humility, Jean became silent, and it was several minutes before she recovered her spirits. “It’s very good of you to be here, telling me all this,” she said at last.

“Well, I’m your ‘mother’—it’s something like a sponsor,” Mary Joseph said. “The sister who ran away from us last night was *my* mother, Sister Mary Andrew. Poor Sister!” With a smile she picked up the silvery material, sparkling like frost,

for the reliquaries. "When I entered, she was sixty-five, and so slow! I was nineteen, and had wings on my feet—I could have flown these stairs. I remember one boiling summer night when we had crawled like snails up to the floor below this, where Reverend Mother and the professed sleep. I couldn't endure it a moment longer, so while Mary Andrew was plodding across the landing, I just circled around the big statue three times at top speed. *She* never knew what had happened, but I heard about it later." Mary Joseph laughed. "Reverend Mother had been standing in the doorway of her cell and had seen me." She took up her scissors and began to cut. "And then all those trips with her reports, for the first few days after I'd entered—they were hard on Mary Andrew, too."

"Her 'reports'?" Jean said idly, watching the beautiful finesse of Mary Joseph's work with the scissors.

"Her reports. After delivering me to my cell, she would have to go down to the community room, where Mother Prioress, or Mother Sub-Prioress, or the novice-mistress, or perhaps all of them, would be waiting. Then she'd tell them what we'd talked about—every word I'd said, as nearly as she could remember it."

Jean stared at her in amazement. "What!" she said. "When you'd spoken to her freely, completely off guard, she rushed downstairs with the whole bundle!"

"She didn't *rush*," Mary Joseph said, with a dry smile, "not Mary Andrew, but she went. Don't you see? She was under obedience—she had to tell them." She looked at Jean with clear, intent eyes. "They're entitled to know what kind of postulant they're getting. The wrong sort could wreck a community—and they want to know all about her, just as soon as possible."

"Oh, that I can see." Jean thought about it as she snipped at the beautiful binding. It was true, the wrong sort of nun would certainly be a danger in Carmel's small enclosed community—

like a ruinous worm in the heart of a rose. "But such spying, tattletale methods!"

"You miss the whole point. How else could they find out, *quickly*?" Mary Joseph frowned. "And a vow of obedience means you do as you're told, whether you like it or not. I'm sure Mary Andrew didn't enjoy it, but she did it."

The clock on the floor below wheezed the half hour, a cool splash of sound, and Mary Joseph leaped to her feet, like a prisoner from his chains. "Time for my bath," she said cheerfully, easing the white toque around her face, adjusting her creaking leather cincture. "I thought it would never come."

Jean looked at her. In spite of the heat, Mary Joseph was still bounding with life. Abandoning for the moment the Carmelite method of finding things out, Jean ventured, "Sister Mary Joseph, I was used to playing tennis and everything in the world. I don't expect that here, of course, but do you suppose they might just let us play *ball*, sometimes?"

Mary Joseph gazed at her in astonishment. "What *next*?" she said.

At that moment, the door opened without any preliminary warning and Sr. Rosaria came in quietly—which was perhaps an occasional manoeuvre of novice-mistresses. She glanced at Mary Joseph standing unoccupied, and the scissors asleep in Jean's lap. "Idle as a hen yard," she commented. "Time for your bath, Mary Joseph, then make up your prayers. But first—go down to the community room. Reverend Mother would like to see your charity."

"Yes, Sister." In a moment, the "August Queen" was flowing across the landing, fading down the stairs.

"Now then, Jean—" Sr. Rosaria closed the door and put on the unpainted chest two sheets of plain white ruled paper, pen and ink. "You're to write a nice long letter to your mother—a *good* one this time—and tell her they can all come to see you

next Saturday afternoon at three o'clock." Sr. Rosaria picked up the blanket and began a minute examination of the raw edges. "The professed nuns see their people only four times a year, but things are easier for our goslings." Her able, fast-moving hands paused; her smiling face darkened with shock. "Oh, *look* at this!" she cried.

Jean eyed the blanket in alarm. "Look at what, Sister?" she asked innocently. And then, beneath the accusing forefinger, she made out a tiny, almost invisible nick in the wool, where her scissors had bitten—possibly when Mary Joseph and she had been discussing saints.

Sr. Rosaria was searching for more evidences of destruction, the blanket speeding through her hands like something alive; with every moment, she found additional ammunition. "Here! Here—and here! What disgraceful carelessness!"

"I'm so sorry," Jean said. "Sister, when I write Mother, I'll tell her to send me another blanket."

Sr. Rosaria's scouring fingers paused. Abandoning the search for further damages, she folded the blanket. "That is not the idea," she said, and sat down on the chair opposite Jean. "That your mother should send you more and more blankets—or more and more of anything else you might harm." Her eyes, that had been kind a few moments ago, were now chilly with disapproval. "If you stay in Carmel—if you stay, which at times I gravely doubt—you will one day take a vow of poverty. Do you understand the vow of poverty?"

Jean felt as though she were poised on ice, with no skates for her feet; a reckless step would be perilous. "I think so, Sister," she said with care. "It means I own nothing—even if I brought it with me to the community. It belongs to us all—whatever I use is only lent to me—so I mustn't waste or destroy what isn't mine. Is that it, Sister?"

"Well, more or less," Sr. Rosaria said, but she looked

mollified. "And I want you to think about the reason behind it. We Carmelites take that vow, to make up to God a little, in our small way, for the wanton waste and destruction of His gifts that goes on in the world."

Jean thought about it—about the quiet nuns polishing and patching and repairing, making one pin do for two, using sharp-edged scissors with a surgeon's care—all to make up to the Lord for the noisy smashing that went on everywhere else. "Why, that's beautiful!" Jean said.

"I'm glad you approve." Sr. Rosaria's voice was dry. "It's practical, too—things in Carmel last forever." The novice-mistress stood, the folded blanket over her arm. "Now—"

Low in the monastery, as though from under the sea, a chime sounded four notes. "Nothing to do with you, Jean," Sr. Rosaria said. "That's my bell—Reverend Mother wants me." She deposited the blanket on Jean's narrow bed. "I'll come for your charity at suppertime. Write your letter, then get back to the blankets. And meditate about Holy Poverty as you do them—no more axe work!"

"Yes, Sister," Jean said, standing respectfully until the door had closed. Then she took a deep, relaxing breath, sighed, and breathed deeply again. Why the pagan world thought once you entered a convent you could never leave, she did not understand—since everybody in the convent seemed to think the best thing was to put you out. "If you stay—" Sr. Rosaria had said.

Jean looked at the little cell. It was growing cooler now, and outside in the garden, birds rousing after the heat were beginning to sing—a garden cart was rolling by, rickety and used-up by the sound, a proper Carmelite cart. I'll stay, she thought, if I possibly can. The letter first, and then the blankets—she sat down at the unpainted chest and drew the paper and pen toward her.

Sr. Rosaria might be a holy fire-breathing dragon, and the

monastery full of more rocks and shoals than Norman's Woe, but she was happy. Smiling, she wrote, "Dear Mother—"

She had meditated on Holy Poverty to such effect that there was not a single new wound in the soft white wool of the finished blankets. As she folded and laid them on her bed, Jean thought with anticipation, She *will* be pleased—and then abandoned the thought. The world operated on the oil of praise; a Carmelite was not supposed to need it. With her hands, she brushed up the silky pink threads from the floor and deposited them in her pocket, for lack of a wastebasket. Even in a place that wasted nothing, there must be one somewhere, but she had been warned not to ramble about, looking for anything; the real life of the monastery was hidden from postulants, like a concealed heart. As she had laboured on the tedious blankets, she had heard it distantly—an ebb and flow of prayer, of plain chant, signalled by the chiming of bells that had meaning for the nuns, but none for her. It had been a background that had given significance to each careful snip of her dull job.

With one last sharp-eyed glance around—the neatness of the tiny room would have astonished her mother—she was preparing to sit down on the chair when Sr. Rosaria's voice outside the door said, "*Benedicamus Domino.*"

Just in time, Jean remembered that social prattle was unsuitable. "*Deo gratias,*" she said.

She had anticipated that the blankets would be gone over minutely, the letter read and perhaps amended, the cell inspected for order, but as the door opened, Sr. Rosaria did not even glance inside. Her face had the controlled stiffness of suppressed emotion. "Your supper—" she said, "come." That frost-edged voice Jean had not heard before, even at Sr. Rosaria's strictest; it filled her with alarm.

Silently she followed the Carmelite's quiet alpargats, clicking medals, across the hall and down the stairs. The stained-glass windows on each landing that had flamed brilliant reds and blues and greens with the sun on them had faded to only a dream of colour; the monastery, very still, echoed like a sea shell to the sound of her shoes. Jean walked with her eyes down and her hands folded under her short brown cape; thinking very hard, she sought to understand Sr. Rosaria's mood. Alone all afternoon with those eternal blankets, how *could* she have done anything? It was possible that the novice-mistress' annoyance did not concern Jean, but it seemed unlikely. It was not just to carry your anger over to the innocent, and in the short time she had known Sr. Rosaria, she had learned that the nun was just. She *must* be guilty of something, but thresh her conscience as she would, she could not flail out a single seed of sin.

At the head of the stairs leading to the kitchen quarters, Sr. Rosaria stopped. "You may go down by yourself," she said briefly. "Sister Mary Joseph will come for you later."

"Yes, Sister," Jean said. Daunted, she looked after Sr. Rosaria as she walked away; something about the Carmelite's back view, of veil and alpargats, moving off, was as alarming as her stony face.

Quietly, Jean went down the narrow, boxed-in stairs, opened the door of the passageway, and closed it behind her. The table was already set with its thick dishes; the turned-up gas jet hissed with a steamy sound. The door into the kitchen, which had always been closed, was open now, and through the doorway came the coarse tick of a clock and that warm, ever present perfume of fresh-baked bread.

Jean sat down at the table, set with a dish of strawberry jam, butter, and the usual large pitcher of milk, the usual tall hill of bread. Since her dinner, the vigil light before the statue had

been cleaned and new wax put in it; the bright flame shone on the Infant's blessing, comforting hand.

Whatever she had done, not to eat her supper would only enhance the crime. So she said grace and began—even in the mouth of a sinner, the bread and the tart, spicy jam were wonderful. She had finished and was sitting there, anxiously waiting for Mary Joseph, who just might have a clue to Sr. Rosaria's behaviour, when a screen door opened close by. She heard footsteps in the kitchen and the clicking of beads—apparently nuns had come in from the garden.

Someone was saying, “—have time to collect the eggs before the bell. I remember Mary Magdalen said she wanted eggs.”

“I'll get the stove going first. Maybe we'd better shut the door—I'd hate to have that dreadful child listening.” A match scratched—flames rustled over kindling like mice. “But I suppose we'd hear the ‘August Queen’ coming—and have plenty of warning.”

“We'd be sure to. Leave it open—and air this place out. After all, *if* I smell like a pan of fried potatoes—” An edge of resentment stung in the soft voice. “It was true I did spill grease on this kitchen habit—and you know how hard it is to get it out again—I just wish I hadn't let the little monster come anywhere near me.”

Jean's hand froze on the uplifted mug of milk, and her heart began to beat sickeningly. It couldn't be—it couldn't be happening to her, yet it was. They were talking about *her*. “She'll not last. The monastery is wacky, and we don't look like saints, and Rosaria is a drill sergeant—”

The other laughed. “You know she is, too. But I'll bet it made her mad, just the same.” Water drummed hollowly into a kettle. “Anyway, I hear Reverend Mother, Chrysostom, and Rosaria are holding a conference about her in a little while.

They think she's too light and frivolous—not Carmelite material."

"Well, poor child." There was the noise of a knife being sharpened, with quick, whetting strokes, and then the voice said philosophically, "They come, and sometimes they go. I expect her family will get a phone call tonight."

"You may be *sure* of that," the other said. "'We are sorry to say we find your daughter unsuited to the Carmelite life'."

Jean's hand let the mug of milk down suddenly, and it clattered against the saucer. There was a loud gasp from the kitchen, footsteps flew, and the door shut; after a moment, from behind it, the preparations for the nuns' evening meal went on, in silence.

Too shattered to move, Jean sat there, wanting to run, to run fast to some deep, dark hole. All day long, like a brainless child, she had jabbered and prattled to Mary Joseph; she had shown off, prancing and dancing around a Maypole, and every foolish word had been carefully picked up and carried back. Had she once mentioned her ardent and stern purpose in being here? Too shy to display the riches of that precious jewel, she had not. For all that the middle-aged Carmelites who would judge her could know, she was only a butterfly who had blundered into the hive of earnest bees by some awful mistake. Her hands clenched on the coarse towel, she listened in horror to her foolish words pelting back at her from every direction like hailstones.

On the stairs came the serene murmur, "August Queen of Heaven, Sovereign Mistress of the Angels—" Mary Joseph was trotting down the steps; in a moment the door flashed open. "Ready, Jean?" she said.

Too crushed for anger, Jean looked at the traitor and stumbled, on shaking knees, to her feet.

Mary Joseph glanced at her sharply, hesitated, then led the

way up the stairs without a sound, as though she had for the moment forgotten their constant companion, the "August Queen."

When they came up into the lower floor of the monastery, the nuns were at silent prayer, behind the closed door of the choir. The Carmelites were not thinking of her now; her silly, impertinent words had dropped away from them, only dust erased by the faultless presence of God. To Jean, it seemed that the beautiful, austere monastery, that she had loved with such an ardent fire, was bleakly rejecting her.

Mary Joseph flicked a beckoning finger out from under her long brown scapular, and Jean went after her, through the empty community room, down the porch steps, out into the garden. Soft and lazy, breathing of summer coming, the late afternoon was yawning toward dusk.

Mary Joseph led her only a little way, then turned suddenly, stopping them under the young apple tree. "What's the matter?" she said. Her dark eyes stared, searched, grew even darker with alarm. "What's wrong? Something certainly is!"

"You ought to know," Jean said despairingly. "Every idiotic thing I said, you took right back to *them*." On the invisible street beyond the high wall, an invisible bus went by with a heavy sound; nearer at hand, the convent chickens made stupid chicken noises. "And I thought you were a friend!"

Judas Iscariot failed to react in the way Jean had expected. Instead, Mary Joseph's hands, which had been held sedately beneath her scapular, suddenly exploded from under it and flew toward heaven, as though calling on high witnesses; her eyes, always bright, flamed brighter and hotter. For a moment, from the young Carmelite seethed a most worldly anger. And then the exasperated hands were retrieved and folded again out of sight; her dark eyes calmed, and only in the unevenness of her

voice as she spoke was any indication that she had ever been breathing out fire and smoke.

"I *am* your friend," she said quietly. "Didn't I spend the whole morning dodging and warning you off whenever I thought you were about to gabble something you oughtn't? I never had such a morning!" Gloomily, she looked down at the raked gravel of the path beneath their feet. "And this afternoon, didn't I tell you all about Mary Andrew and her reports on *me*? Could I have made it any plainer? I all but said, 'The moment I leave you, I am obliged, under obedience, to repeat to them every word you've said'." Rather rudely, she added, "When they were talking about your entering, they said you were such a *bright* candidate."

Jean, listening to Mary Joseph, remembered the day in a brilliant flash, and was appalled. Of course—a dozen times Mary Joseph had slipped aside, evaded, slithered off a dangerous topic like an eel, tried with all her mental muscles to protect her. Clacking and chattering, she had been too busy to notice. It must have made an experience Mary Joseph would never forget, frying in that oven of a cell as she struggled in vain to save the neck of a goose.

"I'm sorry, Sister," Jean said humbly. "It isn't *your* fault. I was just an idiot."

Mary Joseph looked at her as though unable to bring herself to deny it. "If only you'd said something useful, that you wanted to be a saint or something—not stuff like Sister Rosaria being a drill sergeant. She wasn't pleased." Mary Joseph glanced guardedly at the monastery looming behind them. "That's the way she may seem, of course, but she does have soft spots—and she has a wonderful way with souls. *That* you didn't happen to notice." As though the memory of her day once again made her feel hot and badgered, Mary Joseph mopped her face with her large tan handkerchief; putting it

away, she gave Jean a sudden, curious look. "How did you find out? That I'd told them, I mean?"

Starting to explain, Jean closed her mouth. She was very sure that the offended nuns, gossiping about her in the kitchen with an all-too-human lack of charity, shouldn't have been either gossiping or uncharitable. Perhaps Mary Joseph, who appeared to have total recall as well as a vow of obedience, might be obliged to carry back anything Jean said about them, too. And then clubs would fall on other heads than hers.

As though a similar thought had occurred to her, Mary Joseph said hastily, "Never mind—maybe you just guessed."

Standing there, Jean looked at Mary Joseph's troubled face with a wordless grief. She wanted to stay in Carmel: in this difficult, stony place where unkind gossip was wrong and not just a usual entertainment; in this place where even the newest and youngest candidate was judged with the severing sword in hand; in this overwhelming place whose faultless aim allowed of no excuses. I want to stay—I *want* to stay, she thought.

"Mary Joseph, what will happen to me?"

"When prayer is over, soon, they're holding a conference—Mother Teresa, Mother Chrysostom, Sister Rosaria. Maybe they'll call you in to talk to you—maybe not." Mary Joseph paused in thought. "If they decide against keeping you, they'll let you know at once. That's the Carmelite way."

Within the monastery, the great clock chimed the hour, starting Mary Joseph, like Cinderella, into sudden motion. "I was supposed to just *put* you in the garden. Don't hang around here—walk." Already hurrying off, she glanced back. "And try to seem saintly—in case anybody looks out." When she dashed up the steps, one word more came over her shoulder, half whispered as she advanced into the shadows of the convent, "—pray!"

Jean did not need to be told that. Her nervous hands knotted

in a tangle of anxious prayer, she walked obediently down the crisp gravel path. She did not see the windows of the apartment building, burning in the last of the sunset like high campfires. Beyond the monastery's concealing wall, a bicycle bell spangled the soft air; a boy's voice yelled crossly; automobile horns blasted. She heard nothing of that world thrashing and raucous outside the wall as she went down the long path, under the arches of the cloister to the grape arbour, hugged by the thin snakes of its crowded vines, and turned again.

The garden was not bright, yet still full of leftover day, but it must be growing dark inside the monastery—she could see that someone had lighted the gas in the community room, and her heart gave an uneasy, sickened bound. The lighted room meant that they were in there now, the Prioress, the Sub-Prioress, the novice-mistress. Prayer was over, and they were doing what they must have had to do many times before—they were making up their minds about a postulant. Might it perhaps be possible to shape her, after all, into a proper soldier of the Lord? Or was it, as it appeared to be, a hopeless job? Would it not be wisest to bundle her out, nicked blankets (no awareness of Holy Poverty) and brainless chatter (showing the lack of judgment so essential in a religious), the first thing in the morning?

She stared at the drawn window shade, showing palely against the monastery's dark walls. Mary Joseph had said they might call her. If they did, were there any words that could save her? She set her feet in motion, walking them toward the faintly luminous shade, behind which three women who hardly knew her were deciding her life. Battering that motionless shade with prayer that should have rent it like the veil of the temple, she approached the porch, waited a moment in case a summons came, then turned away again.

She knew that if they said so, she would be out in the world

tomorrow, only a schoolgirl once more. For a moment, she wondered what her family, her friends, would think if she were flung back to them—a one-day Carmelite—but that did not really trouble her. It was the threatened loss of the budding apple tree, the stone arches of the cloisters, the great bell asleep in the belfry, and the Carmelite Rule, with its magnificent aim, so faultless and far, that filled her with pain.

Four times she had walked on shaking legs the long walk between the porch and the grape arbour, and darkness was beginning to sponge up the cloister garden, when the shade of the community room's window rose softly. Hands clapped twice in the quiet dusk, and Sr. Rosaria's voice called, "Jean!"

She turned and went quickly back along the path. The shade was up, and the window was open; inside, they were waiting for her. She knew that also waiting for her might be the end of Carmel. She walked up on the porch, swallowed once, with a throat that seemed made of brick dust, and stepped over the low sill.

Economically, only two gas jets had been lighted, and they were not turned high; for a moment, to her anxious eyes, the room seemed full of nuns and the shadows of nuns, as though generations of dead Carmelites had come to watch the judging. But as soon as she had separated imagination from reality, she saw there were only three of them after all, standing before chairs as though they had risen when they called her. Because she did not know what she should do or say, she bowed. She wished that her heart would stop hammering; she wanted to breathe deeply, to gasp for air—she wanted, for one awful instant, to run home crying to her mother.

A leather cincture creaked in the stillness, and Sr. Rosaria said abruptly, "We shan't eat you, child. We just would like to talk to you, get to know you a little better—"

"Yes, Sister," she said, aware at once that her trial was not to

take the obvious path of accusation. Stiffened a little by Rosaria's familiar broomstick, Jean thought, If the Lord wants me, He will keep me here—and He'd better tell me what to say.

With no waste motions, the three Carmelites seated themselves, Mother Chrysostom and the novice-mistress on either side of the Prioress. Before Sr. Rosaria could fetch out a commanding gesture, Jean went to her knees in front of Reverend Mother—from that day's fatal gabble with Mary Joseph, she had just remembered that one should kneel before her, unless told to do otherwise.

But should she look up, or down? If Mary Joseph had told her that, she had forgotten. Because the glittering floor would say nothing except what magnificent housekeepers Carmelites were, she looked up.

Reverend Mother Teresa was looking at her, and Jean knew, for one fluttering moment, why she was Reverend Mother to them all. It was a face that had been worked on by experience, and thought, and God, until anything that might have been feeble or inept had been chiselled away—and it was a face only a fool would try to deceive.

"Well, Jean," Mother Teresa said, "you've been here a whole day now. What do you think of us? What do you think of the life?"

They sat silently before her, and she knew that inevitably in their minds, a barrier between them and her, were all the idiocies she had spilled into the ears of young Mary Joseph. The gas jets snored softly, but there was not another sound in the room. Was Sr. Rosaria impatient? Jean heard a sudden stirring of her alpargats. Mother Chrysostom's pale ascetic face seemed withdrawn, as though she would do her duty with this imperfect postulant, but would prefer to get back to a perfect God. Mother Teresa was merely waiting, studying Jean, as though she could wait and watch all night—and Jean knew the

Prioress' intelligence would cut through mere pious jabber like a guillotine's piercing blade. A brilliant theologian might be a match for the three women before her—she was not. They would never keep her. She had nothing to offer them.

"It is a perfect life—I want to stay here forever," she said. Without thinking, she put her tightly clasped hands on the brown-clad knee before her. "The things I don't understand, I'll understand soon. The things that seem strange and unreasonable turn out to be reasonable, and beautiful." The words she was saying meant much in her head, but were they coming out like the chatter of a parrot? "I mean—I saw that, when Sister Rosaria told me why I shouldn't cut holes in the blankets—the reason was so beautiful." She stopped, discouraged. She was sure there were beautiful reasons for everything, from the wearing of rope-soled alpargats to the halls being places of silence—but they would hardly think they should keep her just to give her artistic pleasure. "I was homesick for a little while last night, but when I woke up this morning, I knew I would never be homesick again. I thought that meant the Lord was pleased to have me here."

"Or it could mean," Mother Teresa said calmly, "that you're so young you are fascinated, for the moment, by these quaint nuns with their quaint customs. When the Rule loses its delightful novelty and becomes just a rule—then what? When your body complains because you have to get up in the dark on a bitter winter's morning, when your spirit complains because you must meet with Christian love some member of the community you do not, in the way of nature, really even like—then what?"

The three of them were looking at her narrowly. Even Mother Chrysostom had shed her aloof air of being someplace else and was studying her with intent interest. What should she say? Should she say she was sure it would be easy, and the Lord

would help her? She didn't believe it would be easy—all the way, she believed it would be hard. And although the Lord would certainly help, today He had allowed her to cut her own throat—He was no champion of idiots.

"I don't know, Reverend Mother," she said, with a struggling honesty. "I don't know what will happen then, when things begin to be hard. But I want to be a Carmelite—something tells me I must try." She felt the warm strong knee stir slightly under her clasped hands—in rejection? And then, stubbornly, because she would hold to that even if they put her out the gate the next moment for saying it, she added, "I know God wants me here."

Trembling with the intensity of her feeling, she stared from one to the other of them, but the three faces maintained their noncommittal calm. "I *know* He does—" she said.

"Well—" The Prioress made a lifting gesture with her hand, and Jean got hastily to her feet. "Sister Rosaria, why don't you take Jean for a visit to the choir, before she goes to bed?"

She saw that no more words were wanted, so she bowed to them and followed Sr. Rosaria's stout brown back out into the dimly lighted hall. Had she said too much, or not enough? What she had said, she should have said better. Wouldn't they be sure to think "God wants me here" was bold and brash? A proper Carmelite did not beat a drum in the face of God.

Going to her knees in the silent choir, she listened to the quiet withdrawal of Sr. Rosaria's feet. She was alone then, except for the statues; flickering at the base of the Virgin's, the vigil light cast a pale glow upward on her blue robes, serene, feverless eyes. Jean had prayed herself out in that marathon in the garden. Too numb to pray any more, she could only recommend herself to Thérèse of Lisieux, who had wanted so ardently to be a Carmelite, too. Companioned by tiny sounds as the flames fed like delicate gluttons on the wax, and faint

wooden creaking and sighings as the monastery cooled in the evening air, Jean knelt with clasped hands.

Nothing stirred or moved. On the floors above, the nuns were in their cells, busy at their evening occupations of work or spiritual reading. She felt the convent all around her, a holy dream, and noiseless as a dream. The strain of waiting for Sr. Rosaria's returning footsteps made her knees tremble, her hands quiver, and when at last she heard the soft whisper of the alpargats, the sound was thunder-loud to her tightly screwed nerves.

The door opened, and Sr. Rosaria crooked a finger at her. Mary Joseph had said if she were to leave, she would be told at once. She got up from her knees and went out into the hall.

Sr. Rosaria was standing, waiting for her, in the doorway to the empty community room. So she wasn't even going to be allowed to get up to her cell before she was told, she thought in despair. As she reached the novice-mistress, because Jean could not bear to look into her face, she looked down at the dull black tips of her own shoes; for a moment, she wondered what her mother would do with a pair of styleless convent shoes, hardly worn. "Yes, Sister?"

"Now then, Jean," Sr. Rosaria said briskly, "I cannot think that you and Mary Joseph spent a very edifying day together. Tomorrow morning you are going to begin to copy out and memorize a book of our monastic rules—by the time you've mastered the reason for our customs, we shouldn't seem quite such entertaining objects. Look at me, child!"

Jean looked at Sr. Rosaria, and the nun's plain face was beautiful to her—it seemed to stream with a splendour of light that illumined the dark hall like an exploding star. They had decided to let her stay. Her mother would have no problem with the homely convent shoes—they would be on Jean's feet

again tomorrow, and for more tomorrows, until they wore out. She did not dare to hug Sr. Rosaria, who would probably have resisted indignantly. She did not dare to seize the bell rope and pull it until the bell thundered her joy over the city. She could only stand there and look at Sr. Rosaria, with a love that should have made her black veil smoulder.

Sr. Rosaria, although perhaps pleased by the look, remained calm. "Mother Chrysostom said she thinks you will do great things for the Lord—you had better live up to that! Well, time to get you to bed." She glanced above her at the monastery, looming over them, landing upon landing, and Jean thought she heard a faint sigh from Sr. Rosaria. "Jean, you should have memorized the 'August Queen,' by this time. Have you?"

"Oh yes, Sister," Jean said, following the nun's look. On each landing the gas had been lighted, but turned so low in deference to that beautiful maiden, Holy Poverty, that the lights were hardly more than beckoning blue stars.

"Then you may say it with me as we go," Sr. Rosaria said. "Begin." Her alpagats started across the wide hall. "'August Queen—'"

"'August Queen of Heaven—'" Jean murmured. Mother Chrysostom had said she would do great things for the Lord. "'Sovereign Mistress of the Angels—'" Her voice blending in with the novice-mistress', she followed the swaying robes, the rattling beads. "'Thou who from the beginning hast received from God the power—'" *She* was not the August Queen of Heaven, but she, too, had received from God the power. How beautiful those blue stars were, going up and up!

She set her foot on the first step of the long stair.

Jean put the scrubbing brush and the yellow laundry soap on the mat beside the steaming pail and looked hard at the steps

leading to the belfry. They were still smoking from hot water, and her eyes, sharpened by ten months in Carmel, could find no fault with them—but that was no guarantee that Sr. Rosaria couldn't. Her back ached; the coarse soap had seared her chapped hands, and the monastery was bitterly cold, with a lifeless, overpowering cold. Occasionally, from far below, would come a series of angry, metallic clangs, as though the doors of Hell were being opened, or shut. Mr. Macon, the plumber, was struggling to fix the baulky old furnace—for hours, the fire had been out, and the February day was closing its fists around the convent.

The trap door to the cupola was swung wide, and she could see the bell hanging above her, an enormous brown pear, and showing through the arched openings, pieces of dull, snow-swollen sky. A Carmelite's mind was never supposed to be a blank, but at the moment hers was, and she bent above the steaming bucket, warming numb hands in its soothing fog.



Unexpectedly—it seemed always unexpectedly—Sr. Rosaria's voice said behind her, "Straighten up, Jean! You know what our holy foundress has to say about the body."

"Yes, Sister," When the novice-mistress chose to, she could

transport herself about the monastery in a miraculous silence that never ceased to astonish Jean. With alacrity, she left the friendly warmth of the bucket. "She says, 'The more you give in to the body, the more it requires'." In these months of rigorous training that had grown ever harder and sterner, St. Teresa's firm views about the body had been part of her education. "She says, 'It is very fond of comfort'." All the same, Jean thought, I am dying of cold—and if the way Sr. Rosaria's black bear of a shawl was hugged around her meant anything, she was, too.

The nun's sharp gaze travelled step by step up the belfry stairs, and down again. "A poor job," she said. "You will do them again, this afternoon."

"Yes, Sister," Jean said. The steps were as immaculate as white sea shells, but Jean knew it was her vocation that was being scrubbed, and not the stairs. Nevertheless, for an uncontrolled moment, she felt discouraged. This afternoon would make her fourth session in a week with the scrubbing brush, the savage soap, the clouds of steam. Hands folded under her short brown cape, she waited, aware that Sr. Rosaria was observing her for the signs of rebellion that would be only natural.

Apparently finding none, the novice-mistress said, "Time for recreation. Get your mending, Jean."

When Jean returned through the frigid hall with her mending—long, shapeless black cotton stockings today—Sr. Rosaria and Sr. Mary Agnes were standing waiting for her in the novitiate, their breaths frosty scrolls on the cold air.

After Sr. Rosaria had prayed that the recreation be for the honour and pleasure of God, they folded their hands in supplication, and all three began to sing, to the tune of "Home Sweet Home":

“Dear saint of Our Lady,
We pray thee today,
To beg little Jesus
Our house bills to pay.
Great debts are all round us,
No hope can we see—
Dear saint of Our Lady,
We come unto thee.”

The novice-mistress sat down, and drew from her wide sleeve a priest's violet maniple which she was embroidering in rich gold thread. It was the only beautiful thing in that bleak, unornamented little room. Although meant for unworldly use, there was something in the quality of the material, the glowing and extravagant shine of the gold thread, that spoke to Jean suddenly, hauntingly, of the world outside the monastery's walls; she found her eyes lingering on it.

“Your mending, Jean,” Sr. Rosaria said, and Jean picked up the black cotton stockings. Not that they were really black any more—ten months of washings had faded them to an odd greyish shade, just as those same months of hard work, and sunshine in the garden, and daily brushings had turned her once crisp brown dress into a patched, mottled piebald garment of many colours.

Erect on her straight-backed chair, Sr. Mary Agnes was beginning to stitch a tattered alpargat. Wonderful with chickens and cooking pots, she was a poor hand with a needle, and the primitive alpargats were all the mending ever entrusted to her. “Let us hope,” she said cheerfully, “St. Joseph will also inspire Mr. Macon to get that furnace fixed—or I'll go out to the hen house. It's quite comfortable there.”

Jean—thinking of Mother Teresa, who had all the monastery on her mind, from a troublesome furnace to the bell in the

belfry, and all its inhabitants, in robes, or in feathers—pushed the cold, hard darning egg into the toe of her stocking. To be Reverend Mother must be infinitely worse than to be a postulant. “I would *never* want to be Prioress,” she said suddenly. “If they ever ask me, I will refuse.” Aware, after a moment, of an electric silence, Jean looked up into Sr. Rosaria’s dark eyes.

“Two things,” the novice-mistress said. “First, I think it much more likely they might ask one of Mary Agnes’ chickens to be Prioress. Second, if it ever *did* come about by some miracle, you would *not* refuse. And as it is quite possible you will not even be received into the order of Carmel, let us stop this silly talk about Prioress, Jean.”

“Yes, Sister,” Jean said. She was so accustomed to the vigorous ups and downs of her life with Sr. Rosaria that to be placed lower than Mary Agnes’ chickens was hardly painful.

For a few minutes they continued to sew in silence, with cold and awkward hands, as the frost embroidered silver-grey ferns on the novitiate’s window. Huddled in their heavy black shawls, and their breaths vapouring on the icy air, they made Jean think of three witches.

From the monastery’s lower floor, the summons bell began to chime. Automatically, Jean counted; a postulant was too unimportant to have a bell, but she had curiosity.

As the bell stopped with its fourth note, Sr. Rosaria rose, her obedience instant. “Continue your recreation,” she said. Looking at them, standing with their shawls wadded about them, she added, “Mortification is all very well, but pneumonia is not. You may stop your work and walk about to keep warm.”

Respectfully, and gratefully, they bowed. When the door had closed, Mary Agnes, after the usual discreet interval, said, “Come on then, Reverend Mother, your worship.”

They dropped their sewing on the bare table, pushed the

three chairs against it, and began to walk behind each other, like Indians, around and around the frigid little room. Usually Jean would have found such novelty a great entertainment, but today her thoughts were heavy, clouded by the low temperatures and the discouraging prospect of another session with the belfry stairs.

"Sister Mary Agnes," she said, beating her arms across her chest, "don't you miss Mary Joseph?" Between the novitiate and Mary Joseph had fallen the great dividing barrier of final profession, and now she was to them only a tall figure in a white mantle seen in choir.

"Oh, that lively one," Mary Agnes said fondly. "Yes, I do. But of course I'll be with her again in a few months, when I make my own final profession."

The faint prospect of *her* final profession—years away, if it ever happened, and so years away from Mary Joseph—discouraged Jean further. "I saw her the other day," she said. "Sister Rosaria must have been sick of the stairs, because she sent me after something by myself and I came across Mary Joseph in the upper hall," Jean could still remember the joy with which she had run toward her and the speed with which Mary Joseph had stopped, faced into a corner, and whispered sternly, "Sh-sh—go away!" After she had gone away, as she had been told, the rebuff had hurt for hours. "She wouldn't talk to me at all, Sister Mary Agnes—it made me sad."

Mary Agnes stopped suddenly and turned upon her an astonished face. "You're just lucky Mary Joseph was forgetful enough not to mention it to *them*—you'd have felt a lot sadder. They hang postulants by the toes from the belfry window for trying to talk to the professed—or you'd have thought they had, by the time Rosaria finished with you!" She shook her head; she marvelled. "It's very like Beelzebub wanting a little chat with the Lord!"

"I know," Jean said, "the Rule. I remember all the rules, perfectly, the moment after I've broken them." She stood looking at Mary Agnes as the pale smoke of their breaths mingled between them, and a deep discouragement fell upon her. Sometimes, she thought she would never be a Carmelite. No matter how hard she and Sr. Rosaria tried between them, she was like an inferior grade of iron on the novice-mistress' anvil—under the firming blows of the hammer, she remained curling and shapeless. "Sister Mary Agnes, I'm afraid they'll refuse me. Usually, they vote on the postulants after six months. I should have been given the habit long ago—I've been in ten months." She glanced down at her shabby, patched, faded dress. "You can see how long I've been in."

"From the looks of that, twenty years," Mary Agnes said cheerfully. "But don't be disheartened—they're waiting because you're so young. Any day now, they'll get out their black and white beans, and vote. Then Rosaria will tell you to put on your good dress, because the Chapter wants to see you."

"And if they don't ask to see me?"

"Ah, then you've had the black bean." Comfortingly, Mary Agnes added, "It won't happen to *you*. Have you picked your name yet?"

Anything could happen to me, Jean said to herself, but the thought of her name in religion, a name she hoped to wear the rest of her life, brightened her. "Sister Mary Clare," she said, "because Clare's my mother's name. 'Of Divine Wisdom,' because I certainly need it."

"'Sister Mary Clare of Divine Wisdom,'" Mary Agnes said. "Quite fancy—but it's pretty. Reverend Mother may let you take it. Now we'd better walk, or you'll be carried in to Chapter as stiff as a board."

They had just resumed their energetic trotting when the door opened and Sr. Rosaria looked in. "Jean, your family's here to

see you, and Reverend Mother's given permission for the visit. They haven't much time, so just put on your apron to cover that dress."

Jean looked at her in dismay. "They're here! They weren't coming till Thursday." Somehow, today, with the monastery so dismally cold, and herself in this scullery dress, with spirits to match, she almost did not want to see them. Her mother was always studying her for signs of unhappiness, and Jean tried to meet that inspection with a reassuring bounce and sparkle she did not feel up to at the moment. "Can't they come Thursday?"

Sr. Rosaria looked at her, and the look covered the matter of obedience to superiors, with some force.

"Yes, Sister, I'll get the apron," Jean said.

When she returned, wearing it, the novice-mistress eyed her dubiously. The fresh apron's job of camouflage was not quite successful; it made Jean's battered cape and dress seem infinitely worse. "Well—" Sr. Rosaria said, "Carmel is not supposed to be full of fine ladies. Come along."

With Jean and Mary Agnes murmuring the "August Queen," the three of them went down the stairs and through the icy corridors. Occasionally a nun, swollen with shawls, disappeared on silent alpagats at their approach. Although apparently in vain, Mr. Macon still laboured; wrenching sounds boomed up through the cold registers. The monastery, usually a place of hushed silence, sounded as though it were being attacked by an angry army.

After Jean and the novice-mistress had visited the choir, they went on to the parlour. Its shutter and curtain still closed, the parlour was dark as an oubliette, and as cold; to Jean, it seemed colder than anywhere else, if that were possible. Thinking of her mother's love of warmth, she wished once again that the family had not come today—as she listened to their muffled voices talking in the other part of the room, she had an uneasy

feeling that the visit was doomed. Waiting silently, she stood there, while Sr. Rosaria, who had opened the parlour for so many postulants, and so many families, went deftly about it.

The wooden shutters folded smoothly back; the rings of the black curtain clicked on its rod, and she saw her father, and mother, and little sister, standing beyond the grille and the bars.

"It's a wonderful surprise!" Jean said. "I didn't expect you." They had been there long enough to get thoroughly chilled; in spite of the fur coat that had been Father's Christmas present, her mother's face wore a pale, pinched look. Even her father, who was a lively, warm-blooded, vigorous man, had comforted himself with a turned-up coat collar.

"We're taking a winter vacation—so we're here today instead of Thursday," he said cheerfully. "Tomorrow, we're going down to see the old people in Florida."

"Oh, that's lovely," Jean said, remembering her grandparents' house. She had not thought of it for a long time, but now, for a moment, the bleak little parlour seemed to fill with blinding sunshine, with the boom and the smell of the sea.

Her sister, who had been searching about for entertainment, suddenly hooked her fingers into the grille and shook it, resoundingly. At eleven, Linda met the world with moods that alternated between a terrible brashness and the easily pained delicacy of a sensitive plant. "The bars," she said. "It's like a zoo here. Want a peanut, Jean?"

"It's *not* like a zoo," Jean said, a little wearily, "and I don't want a peanut. And *stop* shaking the grille."

Immediately Linda walked away, sat down upon a chair, and stared at her shoes with filling eyes.

"Never mind, darling," Jean said. "I didn't mean anything. Mother, you're looking awfully well." She felt as though she were making bricks instead of conversation. Her mood was heavy and she was very conscious of Sr. Rosaria, sitting quiet

and unseen beside her. Sometimes Sr. Rosaria would greet her visitors, sometimes not; when she did not, they remained innocently unaware that the novice-mistress was always with them. Though her presence was only a part of Carmel's quiet, unceasing observation of its candidates, Jean sometimes found it paralyzing to an easy flow of talk—especially when she had blundered into convent business that was no business of the outsider, and Sr. Rosaria's soft hemp sandal pressed warningly upon her foot.

"You're looking fine," Jean repeated, although her mother, probably tired from packing for the trip, did not look too well—her polished handsomeness had lost its glow. Or perhaps her good looks were just dulled by the stunning cold—Jean was finding it hard to keep her own teeth from clicking. "There's something wrong with the furnace," she explained. "That's why it's so chilly in here."

"Oh," her mother said. "I thought it was just some terrible Carmelite penance." She looked at Jean with a sudden sharpness, with the pouncing, intimate, maternal stare from which nothing can be hidden. As it studied Jean—every shred and patch, from her shapeless postulant's cap with its lifeless strings to her red, chapped hands—it became almost the look of a Pietà, and it made Jean wince.

"Jean," her mother said, "you're only sixteen years old. They've made a child the convent drudge—look at you!"

"Now, Mother—" Jean said. Conscious of Sr. Rosaria sitting there, with wide open ears, Jean, in spite of the numbing cold, felt electrified by nervous heat. "The only reason I look so awful is because I didn't have time to change into my good dress."

"You didn't have time to change into your good hands, either." Indignation fired her mother's face. "You had pretty hands—when you were home where you belonged. Now they're like—like wounds."

"Oh, *Mother*—" Jean said despairingly, tucking the unfortunate hands beneath her cape, where they should have been anyway. Those belfry stairs, she thought. Mutely asking for help, she glanced at her father. He could warm and charm her mother out of a mood in a moment. If he chose to, he could rescue this visit, fast heading for the rocks like a windslung Hesperus.

But he did not choose. "I don't enjoy seeing you look like this, either." Critically, he stared at her. "It's too hard a life—we would never have given you permission to enter if we'd thought you'd stay longer than a week!" He took his pipe out of his pocket, then, remembering where he was, shoved it back with an impatient gesture. "You're only a baby. You haven't taken any vows—they've told us often enough you're just a secular until you do." A warm, speculative light stirred in his eyes. "You can leave with us right now—you can come south with us tomorrow. You can be out in the sunshine again, swimming, sailing—" His look at the austere, jail-like room in which they sat was disparaging. "Bars, patches, servants' work," he said. "You were too young to make such a choice."

"Oh, Jean—" her mother cried. "Later, when you're older, if you still wanted to be a Carmelite, you could be. You remember your lovely room at your grandmother's—wouldn't you like to sleep there again?"

Jean remembered. All night long, beyond its wide windows, the sea had advanced and retreated, filling her dreams with its murmuring roar, and all night long the light from the lighthouse had made its endless round across the walls, a brush of pale fire. She remembered the texture of warm sand yielding under bare feet, and the weightless way the ocean rocks a dreamer's body on its shining bed. She remembered food prepared to please, and being waited on, and sleeping late. She remembered dancing. In the cold and silent room, in every

nerve and sinew, she remembered the world and all its pleasures, known—and yet to know—if she wished.

Suddenly beginning to smile, to shine, her mother watched her. "You'll come with us, Jean!"

The quiet figure of Sr. Rosaria, sitting beside Jean, did not speak or move, or even look at her. The novice-mistress waited, in a Carmelite quiet and stillness, deep as the end of earthly time; she might have been carved in that chair. Make your choice, her aloof figure seemed to say; now make your choice.

Under Jean's short brown cape, the hands that had caused all the trouble trembled. Because she could not bear to look at her father and mother, she stared at the bars and polished grille that rose squarely between them. "No, Mother," she said, with a sigh, "I will not come." In Carmel, there was a light, and in the world, in spite of its enticements, there was a dark for her—that was all. "Please, Mother—don't cry!"

Her father stood up, quickly. "Well, there's no use dragging this out," he said, almost with anger. He put his arm about her mother and took Linda's hand. "It's starting to snow—let's not get caught. Goodbye, Jean."

As she listened to their retreating footsteps and the ponderous thud of the outer door closing, Jean thought this visit was a disaster. She felt it in her, a break-bone pain, while Sr. Rosaria closed the curtain and the shutters; the little room grew dark as tar. "Don't be sad," the novice-mistress' voice said out of the dark. "God will work on them—He always does. Come, Jean."

Obediently, she followed Sr. Rosaria through the cold blackness. From beneath her feet, from the cellars, the clanging noises of Mr. Macon's battle still continued. There was also the delicate tinkling of a hand bell, which meant that two veiled nuns were with him, belling the cat, warning Carmelite mice to keep out of the way of the stranger within the enclosure.

Jean's head ached. A crying mother, an angry father—and the belfry stairs—were all bad things to remember. God would work on her parents, and she would work on the stairs, but there was small comfort in her thoughts.

Sr. Rosaria opened the parlour door and put her hand on Jean's arm, holding her in the doorway, which meant the novice-mistress wished to speak to her. At the end of the hall, beyond the plain window which faced the garden, snow was beginning to drive in small, spitting flakes that promised a hard storm.

"Yes, Sister?" Jean said. And suddenly she forgot that, for the moment, her mother and father did not love her; she even forgot the steaming pail and scrubbing brush which waited. In Sr. Rosaria's dark eyes—and it was for the first time in their ten months together of battering hammer and anvil—she had surprised a clear look of respect.

"Now, Jean," the novice-mistress said, "those tatters your charity has been wearing have served their useful purpose of mortification. After you've done the belfry stairs, I want you to put on your good dress."

"My good dress, Sister?" Jean said, astonished. Her only good dress, for all the material-shredding activities of a postulant?

"Yes," Sr. Rosaria said. "You are to appear before the Chapter tonight."

Because Mary Agnes had told her, Jean knew what that meant. It was a moment far grander than the one she remembered, when she had thought, incorrectly, that she would go straight up to God like a jumping jack, following the simple guidance of those blue stars. It was a moment that took all the pain out of the miserable family visit, and ten months of being worked over by Sr. Rosaria—it was the moment for which she had entered Carmel.

"Oh, thank you, Sister!" she cried.

"Bless the good Lord!" Sr. Rosaria said suddenly, in a tone of rejoicing that had nothing to do with her postulant or the Chapter. She was holding her hand above the grating at their feet. "He has done it. Or St. Joseph, perhaps."

Somebody had certainly done something. Spreading upward from the grating, into the dreadful cold of the monastery came a first gust of heat; on Jean's outstretched fingers, it felt like the warm breath of a dog. And the angry clangings had stopped, too; instead, there was the comforting sound of a coal shovel hard at work.

As though she had just remembered St. Teresa's remarks concerning the body, Sr. Rosaria straightened hastily. "Now, Jean, about the Chapter," she said, and a familiar note in her voice shook Jean back into shape at once, "if you're accepted, receiving the habit is a beautiful thing, and a great step forward, but of course it's no guarantee you will make a Carmelite. Your whole novitiate remains ahead of you—and it is a period of great testing."

What other tests could there be? Jean wondered. "Once they put the holy habit on me, Sister," she said cheerfully, "they'll *never* get it off." Immediately, she wished she could have those words back, because they had lighted a prompt, and hot, fire in the novice-mistress' dark eyes.

"Confidence is a fine thing," Sr. Rosaria said. "Pride is an insult to God. We have had this out before—you have the flaw of pride. You're always sure Jean's will is God's will." She gazed at Jean with a displeased sternness that pinned her there. "As long as you think *that* way, you can never accept His will with joy, when it conflicts with yours—and life, even in Carmel, will be confusion and pain. Now go up and do those belfry stairs and meditate about what I've said—I will see you later."

"Yes, Sister," Jean said, bowing and removing herself at once from the irritated presence of the novice-mistress. The "August Queen," and the flaw of pride, accompanied her up the stairs, through the cold halls, and almost past the closed door of Sr. Mary Agnes' empty cell. There she stopped.

Lying on the immaculate floorboards before Mary Agnes' door was a new habit the Vestier had just made for her, and on top of it someone had deposited Mary Agnes' laundry. Except for cincture and alpargats, an entire Carmelite habit was there—brown robe, white toque, white veil, brown scapular. Greatly tempted, Jean stood looking down at the bundle.

She heard nothing except the icy striking of snow against the window; the still hall was silent and empty about her. Mary Agnes was in the kitchen; the other nuns were at work, too, and Sr. Rosaria would not be up for a long time. Jean swooped the bundle into her arms and disappeared with it into her own cell.

When she emerged, the tattered postulant's dress abandoned behind her like Cinderella's rags, she felt oddly solemn; there was something about the heavy robes, the wide sleeves, the scapular and veil, that had a great dignity. Quietly, she went to the bookcase which stood against one wall; its glittering doors made an inadequate mirror-of-sorts, in which you saw as through a glass darkly, but it was the only thing in Carmel, besides Mary Agnes' shining kitchen pots, and the lily pool, that resembled a mirror at all.

Jean bowed to her reflected image; smiling, her hands folded under the long brown scapular, she bowed again. "Sister Mary Clare," she said, with admiration, and respect. Soon, on her reception day, the priest, through the choir grille, would ask her, "What do you request?" And she would answer, kneeling in her white wedding dress, that she requested the holy habit—and that she wished to remain until death behind the walls of

the monastery enclosure, to serve God, and her fellow human beings.

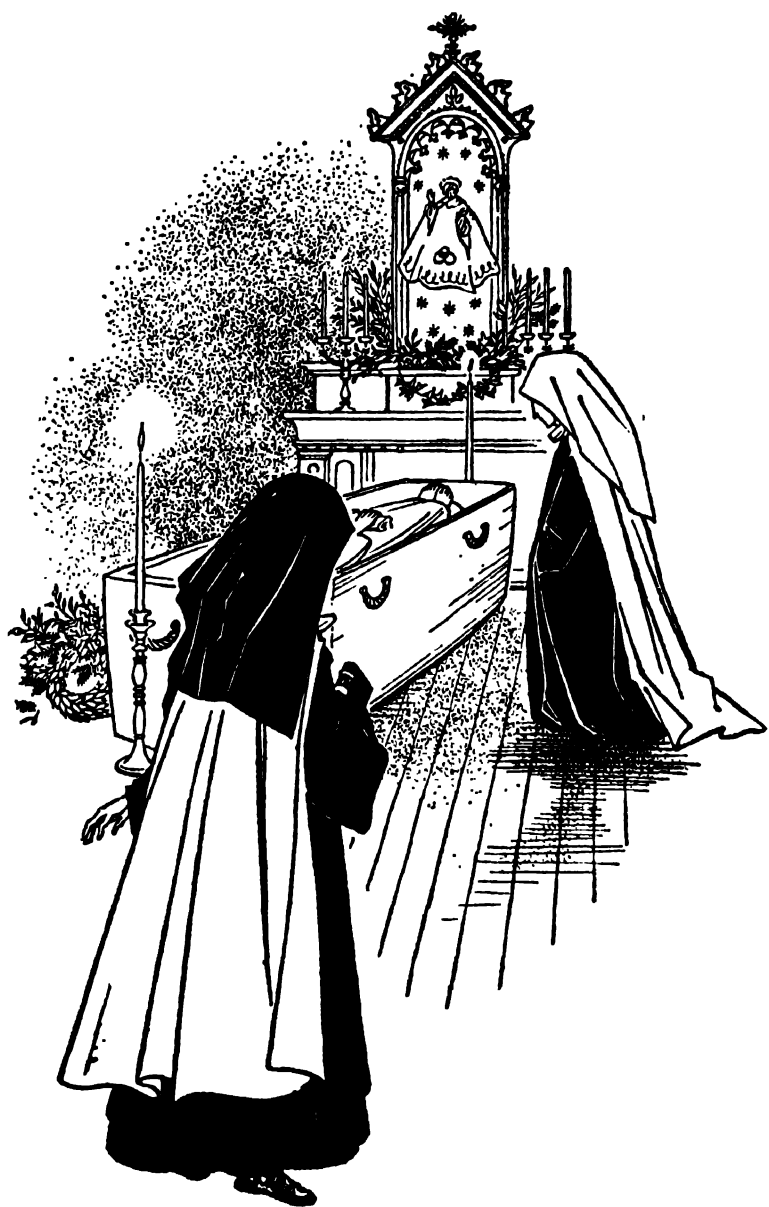
Looking at the shadowy young Carmelite, who watched her so silently from the bookcase doors, she was filled with a boundless joy.



II

THOUGH THOU BE
EXALTED AS AN
EAGLE, AND THOUGH
THOU SET THY NEST
AMONG THE STARS:
THENCE WILL I
BRING THEE DOWN,
SAITH THE LORD.

Abdias 1:4





IN THE entire monastery, Sr. Mary Clare of Divine Wisdom was probably the only one awake. About her, where she knelt in choir, the convent was quiet as an ocean deep. The choir was nearly ready for Christmas, and she was surrounded by the dark shapes and the green, spicy smell of fir balsam and pine. Beyond the shuttered windows, as she kept vigil with the body of Mother Chrysostom, the rain streamed down.

Mary Clare, in her white church mantle, and sixteen years a nun, no longer had to be told to kneel up straight, to hold her hands folded under her scapular, to look a proper Carmelite. The catastrophes of postulancy were so far behind her that she thought of them now only when she wished, because it was useful for a novice-mistress to remember the disasters as well as the innocent artful dodges of the new recruits—and she had been novice-mistress for the month of Mother Chrysostom's illness.

But she was not, at the moment, pondering a novice-mistress' problems—her mind was full of the dead Carmelite by

whose side she knelt. Clare had no illusion that Mother Chrysostom was here with her at all, or pleased with her silent vigil. Chrysostom had loved the monastery, but she had loved the Lord far more. At the moment of death, her rising soul must have left like a released thunderbolt—she would have had no interest in lingering to see if her sisters in religion kept vigil or snuffed the flaring candles at her head and feet.

Getting up quickly, Mary Clare went to the candles, snapped off the charred wicks with an acquired skill that no longer either burned her fingers or killed the flame, then stood for a moment beside the bier. In the rising brightness of the purified light, she looked at Mother Chrysostom.

The nun was robed in her Carmelite habit. Her feet were bare, her head wreathed with a chaplet of roses. Claspèd in her hands was the time-yellowed parchment on which she had written her vows so long ago, and her pale, ancient face had the rare look of the old who have died as sinless as they were born.

No Carmelite would walk to Mother Chrysostom's grave with her. In a few hours her body, in its plain pine coffin with rope handles, would be taken from them at the enclosure door; because she had outlived her relatives and friends in the world, no one would go with her but their chaplain and Mrs. Phelps. Also an entire heavenly host, Clare thought, wasting no foolish pity on one who had no need of it. She went back to her place, and kneeling again, opened her Missal.

Turning to the burial service, she read:

May the angels lead thee into Paradise; may the martyrs receive thee at thy coming, and lead thee into the holy city of Jerusalem. May the choir of angels receive thee, and mayest thou have eternal rest with Lazarus, who once was poor.

Quite at ease about Mother Chrysostom, Clare closed her

book and now devoted her attention to her father, because she was by no means sure *he* had even reached the holy city of Jerusalem yet. Dead five years, he had been a good man, but a lively one, and he might still be in Purgatory, washing off that liveliness. And, coming back from the great silence of the dead, she remembered her mother, Linda, Linda's husband, their baby, and all Carmelites, good or not as good as they might be, including her imperfect self.

Ending with one final prayer to Thérèse of Lisieux, who also had once had the charge of novices, Clare tucked her heavy robes beneath her ankles. Accustomed by now to that spartan cushion, she sat back upon the folds of clothing. Outside the shuttered windows, the rain which had come in on a southeast wind—a soft and springlike rain for the twenty-third of December—fell with a roar on the frozen ground, and a gutter, which needed mending, chattered and spouted. All about her, enriching the evergreen smell, was the heady odour of attar of roses. Today Sr. Dominic, the sacristan, had been checking the white vestments which would be used for Midnight Mass—always kept in attar of roses, they had flavoured Sr. Dominic, and the choir, with an unusual aura of luxury.

Sr. Mary Clare's sense of time was acute—sixteen years with no personal timepiece, but the grandfather clock, which was usually out of sight, had sharpened it to a cutting edge. It now told her that in a few minutes Sr. Paul of the Annunciation would come to relieve her. She would not be late by a moment; heralded by no sound or disorder, she would come silently through the sleeping convent, and only when she felt a firm twitch at the hem of her mantle would Clare know Sr. Paul was there. She thought that not many novice-mistresses could be sure of being relieved at vigil so smoothly and well by a white novice just past postulancy—or indeed, on being relieved at all. It was not unheard of for a young one, summoned in

ample time, to go back to sleep, which caused confusion, and the stern necessity for public reprimand at the next Chapter of Faults. Clare could count Sr. Paul's public reprimands on three fingers, and usually those reprimands fell about novices' heads like hailstones. Was it because Sr. Paul was the only member of her novitiate that she regarded her so highly? Clare did not think so. She had never seen such a promising candidate for the religious life, and she cherished Sr. Paul as though she were a diamond in her new crown.

In a few moments she felt that twitch at the hem of her mantle for which she had been waiting. As she had expected, she had not even heard the smooth opening of the choir door. And when she had risen, bowed to the altar hidden behind the closed grating, and turned to go, Sr. Paul was already placed where she should be—straight as a sapling, eyes recollected, motionless hands beneath her scapular, robes beautifully in order, she knelt beside Mother Chrysostom's bier like a medieval reproduction of the young squire beside the ancient knight.

From the choir doorway, Clare turned and looked back at them—at the old nun who had reached her goal and the living girl who had all the long way to travel, and had begun so well. Even now, Sr. Paul was showing how perfectly she had herself in charge. She could not have failed to know her novice-mistress was still there; the average novice, in such a trying situation, would have become a bundle of twitches and begun to stir about like a nervous little hen, but not a fold of Paul's habit moved—she remained as quiet and untroubled as the wreath on Mother Chrysostom's head.

But Sr. Paul is not an average novice, Clare thought as she shut the choir door and left the two of them to the rain and the roses. And she said to herself, while she went past the Bulletin Board by the choir door, crossed the silent hall, and

began to ascend the stairs, If I do nothing else on earth, I will not let *her* take Paul out of Carmel. She knew that it was certainly not charity to think of Sr. Paul's clawing, haunting mother as *her*—but in the past month Mrs. Foster, battering at the gates of the monastery like an eagle whose nest had been robbed, had been a great threat to Sr. Mary Clare's religious peace.

"Dear Lord," she requested, as she climbed the stairs and passed the first landing with its shadowy statue of the Virgin, "make me stop thinking of her that way. Make me *love* her." Difficult for Clare, surely it should not be difficult for Him: And she put Mrs. Foster out of her mind; for that crown of thorns, she substituted the soothing and dedicated peace of her beloved monastery.

In the time since her postulancy, the monastery had put one timid foot into the modern world. Instead of the blue gas circles on stairs and landings, there were small electric lights—installed some years ago; even the very old nuns had got used to them, and no longer leaped back from the switches as though expecting to be shocked straight to God.

But the effect is the same, Clare thought—of that long, strenuous climb, up, up to the belfry with its slumbering bell, and above the belfry, the stars. Except that now, so near to Christmas, there were no stars, only this strange, springlike rain she could hear thundering on the roof as she ascended.

When she had closed her cell door behind her it was only an hour to rising time, when the clapper would go rattling by outside; it would not be worth while to undress. For a moment, she stood and looked absently at the small, familiar room: except for the Carmelite's knotted discipline hanging on the back of the door, it was the same as the cell of Jean the postulant. Then, because a religious with time on her hands always gave it back to God, she knelt beside her pallet and began to pray, as

she did every morning and night, that she would be a very good novice-mistress.

In the years since she had entered the monastery, her skills constantly tested and explored by the superiors, she had been Sacristan and Infirmarian, and for a long period had handled all except the most important monastery correspondence. But this was the first time she had been appointed novice-mistress; it was a great upward step that she welcomed eagerly, yet with respect. A novice-mistress ran the Lord's schoolroom, and it must not be run badly.

So, until the chatter of the clapper, Sr. Mary Clare of Divine Wisdom asked for the wisdom to deal well with her novice's tender young soul, to meet the exasperations of Mrs. Foster with Christian love, and above everything, to hold on to Sr. Paul for Carmel.

Clare, waiting in Mother Teresa's office, stood quietly, hands folded under her scapular. A little while ago, in the brilliant sunshine that had replaced the steamy rain, Mother Chrysostom had been buried, and the monastery was going on about its business of prayer and work, of getting ready for the Feast of Christmas.

Long years since, Clare had lost her first feeling that she had come to live in an unfurnished house; the stern simplicity of the little office seemed natural and comfortable. The small room, filled with sharp sunlight, was as immaculate as every room in Carmel, and not a dust mote stirred in the bright warmth. On the desk was a portable typewriter, a battered little clock which accompanied Mother Teresa to choir services, piles of papers lined neatly edge to edge as by a ruler—messy papers would have been as intolerable as an untidy Carmelite—and a small plaster skull. Facing the superior's chair, it was an austere reminder to be busy and humble—that the brain of even a

prioress had only temporary shelter, in a some-day empty box.

The door opened, and Clare heard the musical jingling of Mother Teresa's beads and medals.

Bowing, Clare, as the younger, said, "Praised be Jesus Christ."

"May He be forever praised," Mother Teresa responded, and sat down in her chair. She was growing old now, but her eyes had lost none of the dark brilliance that could be tender or scalding, her aristocratic hands none of their dexterity in guiding the monastery. Once more, in the often changing pattern of Carmelite office, she had charge, tired but uncomplaining, of the spiritual and physical destinies of eighteen women.

As Clare knelt before her, Mother Teresa said, "I've been noticing Sister Paul in choir." She looked at Clare, smiling a little. "She has extreme 'style' for a Carmelite. I want you to instruct her that sometimes perfect charity consists in doing things a little less well than one is able. An old, arthritic nun, who has a hard time just getting up and down in choir, might well be exasperated by the brilliance of Sister Paul's risings and kneelings."

"Yes, Reverend Mother, I'll see to it."

For a moment the Prioress' fingers ticked through her papers, and then she picked a letter from among them, gingerly, as though it felt offensive. "Another one," she said, "from Mrs. Foster, to me. I quote. 'Carmel is an inhuman institution, a medieval leftover. Why does the Church, which is glorified by the teaching and nursing sisterhoods, tolerate such an outworn anachronism as the Carmelites?' And, as usual, she wants her daughter back." She dropped the letter to her desk; its handwriting, on the neat and orderly expanse, looked disorderly, passionate. "And I have a heap of letters to Sister Paul waiting for her on Christmas morning—fine Christmas reading!"

"Oh, Reverend Mother," Sr. Mary Clare said unhappily.



Protected by the restrictions of Advent from having to read her mother's letters, Sr. Paul would be given them in two days—smouldering like dragons, they were shut up now in the Prioress' desk, but they would be out. Before she could gain control of her thoughts, she committed, in rapid succession, several sins against the great virtue of charity. "Mrs. Foster will land me in hell."

"Nobody lands you in hell but yourself," Mother Teresa said absently, still frowning down at the angry handwriting. "It seems to me, Sister Paul has been looking rather anxious and pale lately—and from the way you've been trotting her up and down the garden, you think so, too. She's been subjected to this maternal barrage for nearly a year now—how much is it bothering her?"

"She's worrying. She is beginning to wonder if her vocation is here—or back in the world with her mother." The thought of Carmel's losing such a potential light in its crown exasperated Clare anew. "But I'm doing all I can to persuade her she belongs with us."

Mother Teresa's concentration left the letter suddenly and turned upon Clare; she stared at her with amazement. "You *are*?" she said. "You *are*, Sister Mary Clare?"

Nobody looked into those fine dark eyes, if they were registering displeasure at one's behaviour, without alarm. "Well, yes, Reverend Mother," Clare said uneasily. "Sister

Paul is such a brilliant candidate! Surely God wants her nowhere but Carmel."

"How do *you* know what God wants? One little nun, daring to meddle—what a dreadful thought!" For a moment, Mother Teresa expended her full and scorching power on Clare: the effect was like that of being fallen upon by an avalanche. "Has it occurred to you it is quite possible He might *want* Sister Paul to leave us and go back to her mother?"

Frowning, she dropped the pen and folded her hands before her on the desk—still strong and able, they were threatened nevertheless by the pale blue veins of age. "You're intelligent, and practical, with leadership qualities, and I *thought* you had made fine spiritual growth. I thought it was high time you took a more valuable place in the community. Now—you've made me wonder." For a moment's troubled silence, she continued to frown, and then she said, the harshness softening out of her voice, "But I forget I am old in religion, and you are young." As though she read it from a book, she added, patiently, "The duty of the novice-mistress is to instruct the candidate, judge of her qualifications for the religious life, and be in all things to her a mother and a sister. But not to try to be God! If it ever happens that the postulant or novice questions her vocation—the mistress does not interfere with so much as a fingertip."

As she studied Clare, an ironic humour lightened her eyes, and gentled them. "If I'm any judge, you have had both *hands* in the porridge. Well, now you should know better. I want you to talk it over with Mother Sub-Prioress and ask her advice. There is nothing Mother Rosaria doesn't know about being a good novice-mistress."

"Yes, Reverend Mother," Clare said, feeling smaller in her robes, and much less important, already anticipating the whistling sting of Mother Rosaria's advice.

"Very well—that's all." As Clare rose to her feet and bowed, Mother Teresa said, "Pray about this. Talk to God about it, and when you do, keep what Sister Mary Clare wants out of the discussion."

"Yes, Reverend Mother," Clare said. She closed the office door quietly behind her and took a chastened breath. The spacious, sunlit corridor was so full of the spicy scents of balsam and fir that it smelled like a northern forest. There was a quiet bustle about the convent, as of busy, constructive mice. From the choir, whose Christmas decorations were being completed, came soft footsteps, an occasional murmur, and in the distance Clare saw a brown Carmelite brooming a floor for the Lord.

Kept late by the interview with Mother Teresa, she would have to make her bed and straighten her cell before she helped in the choir. As she started briskly up the long wide stairs there was no resentment in her thinking, but there was a little difference between her and the Prioress—a respectful one. It did not seem to Clare that trying to help the Hand of the Lord, in a small way, had really called for the explosive moment in Mother Teresa's office.

The procession was starting. Because, so long ago, there had been no room in the inn, a Carmelite gave the Child shelter in her cell, for each night of Advent. The electric lights had been turned off, and only the flaring candles they carried brightened the darkness, as the long row of singing nuns began to go up the stairs, their white mantles flowing silently higher into the quiet of the monastery.

"Like the dawning of the morning, on the mountains' golden heights—" sang Sr. Mary Clare. *"Like the breaking of the moonbeams, on the gloom of cloudy nights—"* She had a good voice, and took pleasure in hearing it, but had long ago learned not to let it soar, on the wings of pride, over her sisters' humbler efforts.

Clare, who was in the middle of the procession, behind Mary Joseph and ahead of Sr. Dominic, was watching her novice. As the youngest of the community, Sr. Paul had the nervous honour of leading, and she was handling it very well. Clare could see that she had remembered to moderate her style, as she had been instructed to do this afternoon in the novitiate. And she was walking slowly and evenly; she was setting a perfect pace for the leaden feet of the old sisters who were at the end of the line. All the nuns would reach the door of the Sub-Prioress' cell in good order, and together, as they should. Clare could recall some Advent processions, under the hare-brained leadership of other novices, when the old Carmelites had been lopped off early, like the lost tail of a lizard, and arrived late—panting, mortified, and thinking of public reprimands instead of the Infant Jesus.

"Like a secret, told by angels, getting known upon the earth—" Clare sang as the quiet alpargats whispered across the first landing and began to go up the second flight of stairs—white veils, black veils, and golden candle flames ascending in dignified beauty behind Sr. Paul's firm leadership. She must not leave, Clare thought; this fine young religious did not belong out in the bear garden of the world.

The procession, singing, *"Is the mother's expectation, of Messiah's promised birth—"* had reached the second-floor hallway. The nuns flowed along it in a double line, then stood, cloaks falling into the quiet of white flowers, candle flames standing upright, and still at last. The sound of women's well-trained voices, the familiar hymn, the green fragrance of balsam, and the waxen pungency of hot candles were as they always had been, in other Advent processions. Carmel never changes, Clare thought—like the sea, only the waves change. Mother Chrysostom's wave had gone out; Sr. Paul's wave was coming in.

Clare, standing almost opposite the open door of the Sub-Prioress' cell, had a clear view of the small room. Mother Rosaria, now old and arthritic, erased a little, diminished, by time, knelt there absorbed, her robes a dignity about her, until the last alpargat had shuffled into stillness. Then she got up, lifted from the chest of drawers the statue of the swaddled Infant, made her creeping way down the hall between the rows of singing Carmelites, and disappeared into the candlelit cell of the Prioress.

When she came out in a few moments, her arms empty, she took her place at the end of the line, and the procession turned. As the nuns' clear voices went on, "*Thou hast waited, Child of David, and Thy waiting now is o'er—*" they began to flow smoothly down the stairs again, the light of the bobbing candles shining on their young and old faces, the dark monastery walls.

Clare saw that Sr. Paul had remembered Mother Rosaria's arthritis, and had adjusted the pace of her leadership to accommodate it. Paul starts with great goodness, Clare thought. And all the way down to the choir, to the extinguishing of the candles and the dispersal of the procession, she did battle with a tempting mental picture—Mrs. Foster, the victim of an unfortunate accident, locked up in traction apparatus in a neat hospital bed, and no bother to her or Sr. Paul.

As she blew out her candle with vigour, as though she were blowing out the thought with it, and left the choir, she heard a soft, discreet hiss. Sr. Paul was standing in the doorway to the community room, her hand upon her scapular, which meant she wished to speak to the novice-mistress.

Puzzled, Clare went by her into the spacious darkness of the room. What could Paul have to talk about so late, just before Compline? Carmel went on an oiled routine of smooth flowing hours, and when a novice wished to consult the mistress at such an unusual time, the wheels had stopped. Clare's finger on the

light switch brought up the great bare room, with its rows of wooden chairs, its Christmas crèche bedded in cool, aromatic greens, its windows shuttered against the world. "Yes, Sister?" she said, turning.

It was like looking into a blazing star. All through this Advent, Sr. Paul's young face had worn the anxious look of one hunting his thorny way through a labyrinth. Now, flushed with an unknown victory, conflict erased, blue eyes brilliant, she stared at Clare as though she had just shot into the community room from outer space.

"It came to me," Sr. Paul said. Her voice was breathless, and her hands waved joyfully. "This is my first Christmas here. Tonight, it had all been so beautiful, the dark monastery, the moving lights, the singing—I did not want it ever to end, to blow out the candle." She was trembling with an excitement that seemed to reach across the space between them and vibrate in Clare, too. "It came to me suddenly that if I left Carmel, I would be blowing out my candle forever. Sister, I am going to stay!"

From the moment she had seen the glory in Sr. Paul's eyes, Clare had known what was coming, and it was like a soothing salve upon the wounds left by Mother Teresa's sharp words. If she had meddled, hadn't the Lord approved her meddling, by showing Sr. Paul the way out of her maze? A delight as great as the novice's filled her.

"Now, Sister Paul," she said, controlling her voice with some difficulty, "I am sure you know staying in Carmel is not up to *you*." The handbooks for novice-mistresses given Clare by Mother Teresa had all warned that a postulant or novice must never be encouraged with the permanency of her religious tenure—because, in turn, that encouraged slackness. "The decision is up to your superiors in religion. You have merely decided to *try* to stay."

"Yes, Sister Mary Clare, of course," Sr. Paul said, remembering her hands and putting them to sleep under her brown scapular. But she could not put her eyes to sleep, and they were saying, Sister, that is just Carmelite chatter, and you know it; you are overjoyed.

"Almost time for Compline, Sister," Clare said firmly, turning out the light, bringing the dark down on Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, the animals, and Sr. Paul's glowing eyes.

Overjoyed indeed, Clare thought as she went into the choir, empty now but in a few moments to fill with nuns again, as so many times a day it filled and emptied, like a great cup of prayer. She was going to keep her wonderful novice. The clawing Mrs. Foster had been defeated. And words from Compline, which she was soon to chant, sang hosannas in her head. *"Often have they fought against me from my youth: but they could not prevail over me."*

That pleasant feeling of triumph was still with her as she approached the community room the next day. Recreation was going on, and a happy babble came from behind the closed door. It was the day before Christmas; like children, the Carmelites had enjoyed dressing up their austere home with its greens and its crèches—now, with everything almost ready for the great feast of Christmas, they were rejoicing like children.

As she opened the door, the nuns looked up at her. "Welcome, stranger," Sr. Dominic said, and Mary Agnes, turning from the crèche, said, "We *are* honoured." They were all smiling, and glad to see her; the novice-mistress, who must spend her time in the novitiate, is almost lost to the life of the community.

"Greetings, everybody," Clare said cheerfully. She had missed her recreations with them. My sisters in religion, she thought, as close to me as my own sister is—perhaps they were

really closer, because they were her daily companions, and Linda, seen only four times a year, sometimes had to be disentangled like a Chinese puzzle.

Sitting across from each other, they were doing embroidery or sewing as they talked. At the head of the room, Mother Rosaria sat beside Mother Teresa's empty place; in prayer and meditation, Mother Teresa would spend the day alone in her cell with the statue of the Infant Jesus. Rosaria, reduced by arthritis to the simplest mending, was patching a white stocking.

Sr. Mary Clare saw that the Lord had given her an extra plum today—next to Mary Joseph was a vacant chair. If it had not been there, she would not have picked one up and brought it over. Signs of special friendship were not encouraged in Carmel, because too much human warmth might cool one toward the Lord. Nevertheless, Mary Joseph was dear to her.

"What have you done with little Sister Paul?" Mary Joseph asked as Clare sat down beside her. She looked much like the young nun of Clare's postulancy; perhaps she did not speed about the monastery quite like a zooming arrow any more, but she was still electric with the glow and sparkle of life. "Tucked her in bed?"

"You guessed it," Clare said. "With Midnight Mass tonight, I thought a nap for half her recreation would be good for her. Good for me, too." The constant companionship of a youngster—even such an exemplary and promising one—sometimes wearied her.

Clare glanced about. "What a beehive!" Kneeling at the crèche, Sr. Magdalen was touching up St. Joseph's peeling robe with a delicate paintbrush. Beside her, Sr. Mary Agnes, although it was a long time since she had seen a farm, was rearranging the rather arty placement of the animals with a farm girl's knowing eye. And over the laps of the seated sisters, over the coarse brown robes, needles were flying, putting

finishing touches to the beautiful stoles, maniples, vestments, and chalice veils that were to be gifts for the Bishop, the clergy, and the monastery chaplain.

Following Clare's eye, Mary Joseph said, "Father Michael is going to be the best-dressed priest for a thousand miles. But how sad to see Mother Rosaria reduced to patching a stocking! She used to do the most beautiful work of us all."

"You'd better not say it's sad, where she can hear you." Mother Rosaria had retained her crispness of tongue, and the sisters who had ventured sympathy or a helping hand hadn't tried it twice. She had pointed out that *she* was not offended by such impertinence, but possibly God might be—if He had not wanted her to have arthritis, would He have given her such a valuable gift? As perfectly as any of the strong young nuns, in uncomplaining silence, she still kept the Rule, and how she managed to was between her and the Lord.

"Ha!" Mary Joseph said, with a rueful glance. "I offered her my arm once, but never again. I should have known better. Besides, if I live to be a hundred and four, to Mother Rosaria I'll still be that half-baked little novice who always rang the Angelus bell too late."

"The Angelus bell for you—the belfry stairs for me," Clare said, laughing, and they shared a look of reminiscent sympathy.

Sr. Clare was just drawing from her wide sleeve the stole which was her own work for Father Michael when a wooden clapper chattered. Her hands paused, her thoughts stilled. The big, buzzing room, reminded by the clapper of the silent presence of God, froze into a voiceless hush.

Mother Rosaria, from the Sub-Prioress' chair, looked up. With a tartness reminiscent of her old days as novice-mistress, she said, "Not *quite* so frequently, Sister Malachy."

"Yes, Mother," Sr. Malachy said, "I'll remember," but her

broad pink hand, clutched about the clapper, retained an eager liveliness.

"A noisy recreation?" Clare asked softly. The clapper was supposed to be sounded only every fifteen minutes, but when she was Monitress, Sr. Malachy could never manage to keep it to that.

"Somewhat," Mary Joseph said.

Both of them looked at Sr. Malachy, sitting, large and beaming, holding the clapper. Because they were women trained for years in the charitable, the loving acceptance of others' faults, their looks were kind. Every convent had its Malachy, who could be counted on to do all things wrong, with the best of intentions. Dropped office books, incorrect responses, oversalted food, or food with no salt, tactless remarks, blunder upon blunder—the monastery, wincing, took from Sr. Malachy. But because she also gave splendid opportunity for the practice of virtue, and had a true love for her sisters in religion, it would have occurred to nobody to wish her elsewhere. When her time came, she would, with regret, and some relief, be given fondly back to God, who made the brainless as well as the bright.

"Well," Mary Joseph said, picking up her work again, "you look as cheerful as a cricket. Good news from Heaven or the world?"

"Both," Clare said, resuming with Father Michael's stole. "For one thing, Sister Paul is going to stay."

"I am happy for you," Mary Joseph said amiably. "Though, for my part, I do not know if I will be able to live up to Sister Paul for the rest of my life. Such spit and polish!"

"Oh, she has already been corrected for that." Clare paused to draw a fresh thread of gleaming gold through her needle. "The other good news—I'm having a family visit tomorrow. Mother, Linda and Charles—and the baby." She had never

seen the baby before—this first product of Linda and Charles. "I'm an aunt." It felt odd. Out of the world's way as she was, behind these high stone walls, nevertheless the world had turned, and given her a new title. Surely it was not so very long since Linda had said the monastery was like a zoo, and offered her a peanut? Long enough, apparently. "That fresh Charles," Clare said, "on his first visit, he called me his beautiful Carmelite sister-in-law." Later, in the garden, the still, reflecting surface of the lily pool had drawn her toward it, just to see if Charles was right; fortunately, the goldfish had thought she was about to feed them and broken the surface as she approached, before she had wallowed in vanity.

"He said that?" was Mary Joseph's neutral comment. In Carmel, one did not make personal remarks, or put so much as a fingertip in the butter of flattery. Holding up the maniple she had just finished, she looked at it with innocent pride, then laid it down, immaculate and perfect, on her homely brown habit. "I trust you're on a more respectful basis now?"

"It took a while, but we are."

Suddenly, again much too soon, the clapper sounded, and the breathless quiet fell once more on the voices, the busyness. This time no one, not even Mother Rosaria, made any comment, as though all felt Sr. Malachy might just as well be left to it. When the talk resumed, Sr. Clare said, because the clapper-clack, no matter how frequently sounded, *was* supposed to draw one's thoughts to God, "Today, when I was spelling you at the turn, Mr. Englehardt stopped in and asked for our prayers. He wants to get his mother out of Germany—he is afraid Hitler is going to start a war."

"That Hitler!" Mary Joseph said. The world, when troubled, promptly poured its pain upon the Carmelites. Lately they had felt, beyond the monastery's walls, the sighing and battering of a darkened sea.

For a moment they looked at each other, watching a heavy cross loom that they would have to help carry, but then Mary Joseph said, "Oh, it is Christmas Eve, Sister!" and willingly they buried Hitler between them. They began to speak of Mother Chrysostom, who had the happy fortune to be spending Christmas in Heaven, and of Mary Joseph's brother, who was young and good, and hopeful of becoming a medical missionary. Mother Chrysostom and Jack made pleasanter topics than Hitler; they talked of them both until the bell signalled the end of recreation.

On the instant, as though at the stroke of a sword, voices ended in mid-sentence. Sr. Magdalen's paintbrush halted in the air; flickering needles stopped dead—even Sr. Malachy, who had been about to rattle her clapper again, froze to it. Once more, in a disorderly world, a Carmelite recreation had ended in the order and beauty of perfect discipline, in the silence of the Rule.

Sr. Clare gathered up Father Michael's stole and rewrapped it in its protective tissue paper, which was soft from many usings—the paper would not be thrown away until it had thinned into white feathers. She was just following the others from the community room when a hand tapped her firmly on the shoulder.

"I want a talk with you, Sister Mary Clare," Mother Rosaria whispered. "Get your heavy shawl and we'll go out in the garden."

Startled, Clare bowed. A talk with the Sub-Prioress, at such an unusual time, might mean anything. And only Mother Rosaria, with her fondness for fresh air, could consider the garden an attractive place for a talk: outside the windows of the room was a thick grey sky, bulging with snow; it would hardly be good for the old nun's arthritis. Besides, Father Michael's stole was not yet finished—she had meant to complete it in the

next hour. And, on the day before Christmas, there were a dozen other things that needed doing as much as the stole. All of which meant nothing, because the vow of obedience left no room for even thought of argument. Clare went at once to get her heavy shawl.

When she came back to the community room, empty except for Mother Rosaria, the old nun was bent over in a chair by the porch door. Slowly, she was putting on the big, clumsy, men's rubbers, the only things Carmelites could fit over their shapeless alpargats. Stiff hands and stiff ankles made difficulties, and Clare could have flipped the rubbers on for her in seconds, but knew better than to try. With no hint of impatience, she stood and waited, sorting over in her mind possible reasons why she needed to be talked to, in an icy garden, in a manual work period.



For several moments Mother Rosaria made puffing, laborious sounds, and then there was a last, rubbery snap. "All right now," she said rather shortly, as though for once even she had been irritated by the battle.

Clare pulled her long shawl over her head, hugging it around her like a black blanket, and they left the warm, balsam-

smelling convent. Outside, it was quite as cold as she had expected, with a puncturing dampness, and the stark, leafless garden glowered, the charm of its green spring so far away it seemed impossible. In silence, they walked down the long path, at the old nun's slow, limping pace.

The deep lily pool, emptied now of its lilies, was covered with a thin sheet of greyish ice—beneath the ice, in the dulling temperatures of the surrounding water, the goldfish slept through their winter stupor, waiting for the softening air, the tingle of spring, that would awaken them.

As Mother Rosaria walked on without speaking, Clare began to find the Sub-Prioress' silence unnerving. If she knew her, and she knew her well, it could mean that Mother Rosaria was sharpening her assortment of weapons, already sharp enough. Although reproof of a professed nun was the province of Mother Teresa, Rosaria, a few times since Clare's profession, had stepped in to give her a firm, shaping-up shake—possibly from a slight feeling of ownership. Clare had been her postulant, and at the time Clare had made her final vows Mother Rosaria had been Prioress—it had been between Rosaria's strong hands she had placed her own, on the day she renounced the world forever. So Rosaria's eye had remained on her sparrow, and at the moment, the sparrow felt a chill wind in its feathers.

At the end of the path, beside the flat, frozen-hard vacancy of Sr. Mary Agnes' vegetable garden, they turned and began to walk back toward the monastery. To distract her mind, lest it begin to flap like a brand-new postulant's, Clare looked at the building. Old, and starting to creak when she had entered, now it was shabbier still. It needed to be replaced, but Clare thought that would hardly happen while Bishop Porter was Bishop of the diocese; although he professed a great admiration for contemplatives, his commitments seemed always to go to

the teaching or nursing sisterhoods—"My busy bees," as he was so fond of saying. Too fond, the Carmelites thought, but daily, and ungrudgingly, they prayed for Bishop Porter and his busy bees.

As though she felt that Clare must now be sufficiently prepared, Mother Rosaria said suddenly, "Reverend Mother told your charity to have a talk with me. How is it that *I* have to initiate the talk? Are we going to have to tell you to do things in virtue of the vow of obedience?"

"Oh, Mother!" Clare said, so shocked that she stood still. A nun's obedience was taken for granted. Only in the gravest of matters was she ever ordered to do anything in virtue of the vow of obedience—and a nun so ordered could consider herself a poor religious. "I thought—you see, Sister Paul is staying, after all. To talk to you about her didn't seem necessary." It suddenly seemed terribly necessary, and undone—forgotten among the Christmas greens, chatter with Mary Joseph, and Father Michael's stole.

"And how is it," Mother Rosaria said, gazing at her with bleak eyes, "that neither Mother Teresa nor I had been informed of Sister Paul's intent to stay? Is Carmel a hotel, where the novices come and go like overnight guests, and nobody knows but the novice-mistress?"

Telling her superiors anything of moment concerning the novitiate was an immediate duty of the novice-mistress. Somehow, that, too, had got lost. Appalled, Clare pulled her shawl closer about her, against the penetrating cold, against Mother Rosaria's anger. "I would have—I should have," she said, "but it's Mother Teresa's Day of Recollection. I thought—"

"Is it *my* Day of Recollection?" Mother Rosaria said wrathfully. "But perhaps it is. I remember a little postulant I once had—for all your faults, you did not attempt to change the

rules of Carmel, nor did you make those green-sick things, excuses." As though she were mortally offended with her, Mother Rosaria suddenly stamped on, in her big rubbers, and Clare almost had to run to catch up.

"'It seems to me, humility is the truth'," the old nun was saying as Clare reached her. "But it was only a saint who said that, Sister. Perhaps you would correct her, too?"

"Correct St. Thérèse?" Clare said despairingly. "Mother, I am sorry. I should have talked Sister Paul over with you and I should *certainly* have let you know she was staying."

"You should have," Mother Rosaria said, with a look at Clare as forbidding as the day. "However, the one wonderful thing about life in Carmel, or in the world, is that it need never be too late." At the steps of the convent, Mother Rosaria turned, and they started off again, down the long, rock-hard path, under the gray stone roof of the sky. "But I would just as soon not have to wait for your deathbed to see you become a perfect Carmelite."

Not knowing whether yes or no would be more suitable, Clare said nothing. The raw dampness had long since felt its way under her heavy shawl, and in a moment her teeth would begin to chatter, but the little old Carmelite's face was rosy, whether from the icy temperature or wrath, Clare did not know.

"How I could ever have thought that some day, in the future—" Mother Rosaria interrupted herself and made tut-tutting noises. "—I must have been simple, since you make such a remarkable novice-mistress." Once again they had reached the frozen lily pool, and the Sub-Prioress' hand reached out from under her shawl and turned Clare back toward the convent. "Tonight, at Midnight Mass, I wish you to approach the Lord with the humbleness of a *saint*, Sister Mary Clare."

"Yes, Mother," Clare said. "I will try."

"Now you had better go in—your teeth are clacking," the Sub-Prioress said as they approached the steps, and there was a tinge of scorn in her voice. "You young people seem to feel the cold. And Sister Clare—"

"Yes, Mother," Clare said, turning and looking down at her. Bent as she was by her arthritis, Mother Rosaria did not look defeated by it, or indeed even cold—she was pink and electric in the bitter air.

"Be very careful," the old nun said soberly. "Your fault of pride stays with you. I have warned you before—if you let it live in you, it will bring you nothing but pain." She shook her head. "And hands off Sister Paul! Meddle no longer." Her troubled, displeased eyes held Clare standing before her with all the guilty feelings of a postulant. "God does not like meddling with souls. Nor does He care for proud novice-mistresses."

"Yes, Mother, I'll be very careful," Clare said, and she entered the warm, balsam-tinged air of the monastery with a deep breath of relief. She felt as though she had been scrubbed, broomed, and blown through by a cleansing gale—which was the usual result of a corrective interview with Mother Rosaria.

The great Feast of Christmas was a day of happy relaxation in the monastery—from the coffee and coffee cake that followed Midnight Mass to the open community room, available at all hours to anyone who wished to step in and talk with her sisters or sample the candy boxes on the table. For this day the rigid spine of the Rule unbent, and the Carmelites played like schoolgirls, enjoying the decorous gifts sent them by their families, chattering together in an unaccustomed freedom.

Handing about a huge box of chocolates she had received from Linda and Charles, Sr. Mary Clare was in the community room. The box was built like a chest of drawers with tiny gilt



handles; when empty, it would be useful for storing the little gospels and scapulars and reliquaries that were her gifts to the world. At present the drawers held gold- and silver-wrapped delicacies upon which the nuns, appetites whetted with Advent fasting, were falling with joy. There was even, Clare had noticed, a shelf of liqueur chocolates; they would have to be sifted out and given to some visitor at the turn who had a taste for such things. Except for one bottle in the Infirmary cabinet, there was no liquor in Carmel, and since the Infirmarian looked upon alcohol as a demon it was never touched, but merely grew in age and virtue, like a good Carmelite.

"Merry Christmas!" Sr. Malachy said, beaming as the box reached her. But for the hours of Divine Office and prayer, which no day ever changed, she would spend all her time in the community room, happy with the nuns and the candy boxes.

"Merry Christmas, Sister," Clare said, waiting patiently while Sr. Malachy prospected. When Clare had entered, a first child and an older one, she had had a flaw of selfishness among other blemishes to which Rosaria had objected, but it had been

rooted out of her long since; now she would not have minded if Sr. Malachy's fat pink fists had made off with the entire contents. However, the waiting was a little tedious while Malachy pondered square shapes or round shapes, silver-wrapped or gold, and when Sr. Mary Joseph beckoned her from the doorway she was relieved to deposit the entire box in Sr. Malachy's brown lap.

"My family here?" Clare said, joining Mary Joseph.

"Yes—Mother Teresa said she'll stop in to see them later. And someone else. Sister Paul is outside, and wants to talk to you." Mary Joseph gave her a look of thoughtful sympathy. "I know not why. But she looks like Banquo's ghost."

Clare frowned. A shadow, the darkness of the world, was falling upon the glory of Christmas and the anticipation of her family visit. She had left Sr. Paul in the novitiate, with the few gifts of the many her mother had sent her which were suitable for a Carmelite novice—weeded out, among other things, had been a costly diamond wrist watch. She had also been obliged to leave the pile of Mrs. Foster's letters which had been accumulating all Advent. Of course that's the trouble, Clare thought. From the drawer of the Prioress' desk, the dragons had been let loose.

After the bright, voice-filled community room, the wide quiet hall seemed dark, and Sr. Paul's figure, standing in a doorway, dark also, trouble bundled in a Carmelite habit.

Summoning fortitude and the Lord, Clare beckoned her into the empty turn room and looked at her. Sr. Paul's face, usually eager and warm, was so dull with gloom it promised badly. "Yes, Sister Paul?" she said.

"Sister, I've read my mother's letters." Unshed tears made her eyes look like blue glass. "She is so unhappy. She hates Carmel—I think she almost hates God." With a sigh that could have come all the way from her very new alpargats, she said,

"If my staying in Carmel makes her hate God, I won't stay. When she is here this afternoon, I will tell her I am going to leave."

A battle array of arguments and objections jumped into Mary Clare's head, and just as quickly jumped out again—for with them had come Mother Rosaria's scoring admonitions to novice-mistresses. "It is your decision, Sister Paul," she said, wishing that it were not. "But I will have to tell Reverend Mother. Go back to the novitiate—and I'll talk to you later."

"Yes, Sister," Paul said, still managing to control her tears.

As the "August Queen" wound sadly up the stairs again, Sr. Clare went along the hall at a pace really too fast for a Carmelite. Encountering Mary Joseph, she touched her veil, to indicate she wanted to find the Prioress.

With a look of commiseration that said *she* would not wish to be novice-mistress if the world on a platter came with it, Mary Joseph pointed toward the open door of Mother Teresa's office; a glory of sunshine, enhanced by the snow that had fallen during the night, spilled through it onto the polished floor.

In the bright, warm, bare little office, Mother Teresa looked up from a prioress' required reading—the convent's financial books and a dreary sheaf of bills.

Even on Christmas Day! Clare thought, and then she said breathlessly, because an illumination had come to her in the short distance between the turn room and the office door, "Praised be Jesus Christ!"

"In such haste, Sister Mary Clare?" Mother Teresa said, with smiling reproof. "But—may He be forever praised. What is it, Sister?"

Clare knelt before her. "Mother, Sister Paul has read those dreadful letters. When Mrs. Foster comes this afternoon, Sister Paul is going to tell her she's leaving us."

The dark eyes looking into Clare's remained unperturbed, as though a lifetime of Carmel had inured Mother Teresa to the batlike ups and downs of the little novices, between earth and heaven. "Well?" she said.

The calmness, perhaps the coolness, of that "Well?" calmed and cooled Clare at once. She adjusted her thoughts, and reconstructed a few phrases. "Mother," she said, after a moment, "if I have your permission—I wonder if it might not help Sister Paul if she sat in on my visit for a little while? You remember how bitter my own mother was when I entered?" Clare would never forget the bitterness of that first year; visit after visit, the small Carmelite parlour had been filled with the rebellion, the gloom, the resentment, of her mother—it had taken a long time of sunshine to wash the sticky darkness off its walls. "And you know how she is now, completely happy that I'm in Carmel." Mother Teresa's lack of comment was beginning to make the going heavy. "Linda and Charles have to leave early. So I thought that if Sister Paul, without my mother's knowing she was there, of course, could just listen to me talk to Mother about those days—about how she felt then, and how she feels now—it might help Sister Paul. She needs help."

"And there is no one to help her?" Mother Teresa said, looking at Clare. It did not seem to be a question for which the Prioress expected an answer, and there was a puzzling something in the other nun's eyes that made Clare decide not to try. "However—yes, you have my permission. You may go, Sister. They are waiting for you."

"Thank you, Reverend Mother," Clare said, rising from her knees and bowing. She had the uncomfortable, baffled feeling that a door had closed against her, without a sound or a touch, but she did not know what door, nor why. And the permission had been given so easily, surely she must only imagine it? She

would have liked to stay, to sift the quiet air, but you did not linger when the Prioress told you to go—and already Mother Teresa had returned to her books.

Sr. Mary Clare went back down the hall at a more decorous pace, slowed by misgivings. But, unable to find any sensible reason for alarm, she abandoned it at the choir door. The religious life, being aimed at perfection, had a delicate atmosphere, and she might well have misunderstood Mother Teresa's weather—perhaps the Prioress had been suffering merely from the grim tedium of convent finances.

Within the choir were the blended ghosts of Midnight Mass—incense, and attar of roses. Clare knelt, for that Carmelite visit with the Lord before she mingled with the dangerous world in the parlour. Since the world and she and the Lord had long since understood each other, and her family had been waiting quite a while, Clare was soon out in the hall again.

She went past the tiny turn room, where she could hear Mary Joseph's clear voice promising their prayers for someone who needed them, walked through the pleasant babble of the community room, through the Vestier's room, and into the dark parlour. With a few expert motions she rattled the hinged shutters back on themselves, letting in an explosion of light, and pulled the curtain. "Merry Christmas!" she cried.

Family voices, family love—in spite of the grille and bars between them—ran to meet each other. How warm a thing it is! Sr. Clare thought, in those few moments like the whirling of a kaleidoscope, when they all talked at once, before they would slow themselves to the easy pace of the long, unhurried visit.

"Oh, Mother," she said, "you look so well!" She did; gone was the pale ravage of that terrible year after her father's death, when her mother had stayed on earth only because she could

not get off it. She had grown plump again; her eyes shone once more—long since, she had returned to the living.

"So do you, Jean," she said, giving Clare the usual thorough quarterly inspection, but one that no longer sought to find a crown of thorns upon her head. "Wonderful! You got our presents?"

"All of them—the books, and the beautiful shawl, and that enormous candy box—the sisters are having a ball with it." Clare looked at Linda, holding the baby in her arms as she stood, smiling, beside Charles; young, joyfully married, the oyster-flavour of the world was in their mouths. "Bring Susan up *close*," Clare said, and Linda carried the blanket-wrapped baby to the grille. As manly as Adam, the proud Charles loomed above them.

Expected to marvel over her neice, at the moment sleeping, a doll of miniature eyelashes, minute hands, bird-down hair, in Linda's protective arms, Clare marvelled loudly. Even as she did, she thought, But the baby is a miracle, as astonishing a production of the Lord's seed as the tiny things that became carrots and tomatoes and lettuce in Mary Agnes' garden. "She's beautiful," she said, looking at Susan with interest. Whatever she would be—mother, nun, saint, or sinner—slept in the tightly curled bud.

The visit went on, slowing to the easy, intimate pace of family gossip, exchanged, examined, stitched into their separated lives to make them one again. By the time Linda and Charles got up to leave, Clare had gathered and packed away all that had happened to them in the quarter of a year since she had seen them—the interesting details that withered in the dry ink of letters. Affectionately, she said goodbye—long since she had acquired the skill of sending love that could be felt through the barrier of grille and bars.

"Now, Mother," she said, when the parlour door had closed

behind them, "if you'll go to the turn, Sister Mary Agnes has prepared a little collation for you. Coffee and fruitcake. Just go easy on the cake." Fruitcake was the one thing Mary Agnes did badly, and she did it so badly it was regarded as a penance. "It's a trifle heavy this time."

"It always is," her mother said with resignation. Accustomed to it by years of Carmelite collations on the priest's china, she no longer complained of Mary Agnes' cake, solid as a thunderbolt. "But only a *small* piece, Jean."

"As small as I can manage," Clare promised as she went out—Mary Agnes was very generous with her ponderous product.

By the time Clare had reached the turn room, Sr. Mary Joseph, with a large wooden tray, was coming up the stairs from the kitchen. On the tray was a steaming china pot of coffee, cream and sugar, the priest's glittering silver, and what looked like half a fruitcake. "Oh, my poor mother!" Clare said.

"Your poor mother indeed," Mary Joseph said. "If I can only get the turn to go around with this weight on it!"

Leaning a little, she disappeared into the turn room, and Clare went to the community bell. She had just tapped the ninth chime—the summons to the novitiate—when she heard, far above her in the mountaintop of the monastery, the novitiate door open and close softly. Obedient on the instant, to the last, Clare thought, listening to the distant patter of the "August Queen," starting down the stairs. It sounded slow and unhappy, as though Sr. Paul, as she prayed, was saying farewell to the sunshine and silence of Carmel, bidding goodbye to the long halls, the wide stairs, the belfry bell—the plain brown habit, and the alpagats that walked always toward God.

Sr. Mary Clare did not waste the time of waiting; she prayed, too. She was quite as certain, as she had been about herself, that the Lord wanted Sr. Paul; all that she had been allowed to do, she had done, and now it was up to Him, who could flood Sr.

Paul's dark confusion with His overwhelming light in a moment—if He chose.

Standing there, troubled, anxious, it seemed to her that the novice would never arrive—coming, as she should have, at that edifying Carmelite pace. But at last, in the sunshine of the landing above, Clare saw her appear, small, well formed, hands tucked under her brown scapular—as neat in her robes as the statue of Thérèse of Lisieux which stood in the choir. And finally the sad murmur of the “August Queen” came down the remaining stairs and stopped at Clare's side.

“Sister Paul,” she said, “Reverend Mother has given an unusual permission for you to be in the parlour, with my mother, and me. You are not to let my mother know you are there—or take part in the conversation. You are just to listen.”

Sr. Paul's tear-glazed face—because it was obvious that alone with her sorrows in the novitiate, tears had drowned her—now looked puzzled, as well as unhappy. “Yes, Sister,” she said, in a numb voice, the life wept out of it.

“Come along,” Clare said briskly. “And brace up, Sister.” She did not want unexplained sniffles emerging from the darkness of the parlour to bewilder her mother. “It's an insult to God to meet the cross with complaint. The Carmelite carries her cross with joy—and it carries *her* to the Lord.”

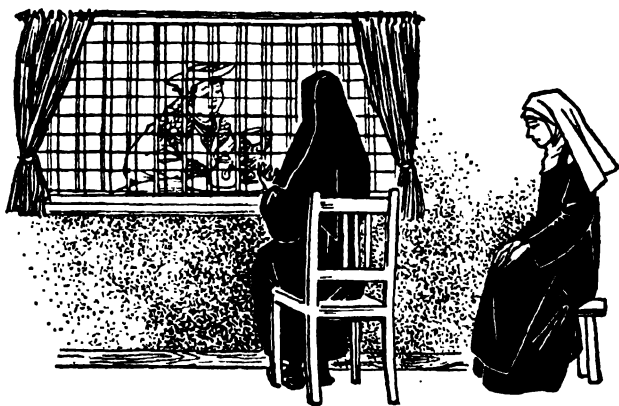
“Yes, Sister,” Paul said, and followed Clare at a stirred-up pace that took them down the sunlit hall, through the bustle of the community room, through the Vestier's room, and to the parlour door—Mother Teresa, just leaving, was closing it behind her.

Bowing respectfully, they stood back against the wall, because the Prioress, as the surrogate of God, is not skipped by lightly. Tall in her robes, she walked past them, with a pleasant, noncommittal greeting that told Clare nothing of Mother Teresa's mood.

Clare waited until the sound of beads and alpargats was gone, and then she said, "Quietly now, Sister." Opening the door, she pointed toward a chair where Sr. Paul, out of sight from the visitors' part of the parlour, could listen unseen, then walked into the middle of the room. "How goes it, Mother?" she said.

"Oh, dear, badly." Her mother looked up from the tray on her lap. Dark, bald, a large piece of fruitcake remained upon her plate. "I don't dare eat any more of this—but I wouldn't hurt Sister Mary Agnes for worlds. Jean, what shall I do?"

After having weighed the great virtue of charity against the great vice of deception, Clare decided that charity had the fairer face. "Wrap it up in your handkerchief," she said, practically. "And take it away with you."



"A load off my mind—and digestion," her mother said with relief. Making a neat parcel of the cake, she dropped it, audibly, beside her handbag on a chair. "I had a grand visit with Mother Teresa. Jean, what a wonderful woman she is!"

The parlour is bright with sunshine now, Clare thought, but she could remember the angry darkness that had filled it once.

And she thought of Sr. Paul, motionless and silent as a plaster image in the corner, and Sr. Paul's mother, whose fury at Carmel and its prioress was a frightening thing. "Yes, Mother Teresa's a wonderful woman," Clare said gently. "Times *have* changed, for you and for her, haven't they?"

As though she had forgotten long ago that times had ever been different, her mother looked puzzled for a moment, and then, suddenly, abashed. "When you entered, you mean? Good Lord, yes!" she said, with explosive force. "I think I almost hated her—oh, I know I did. I thought of her as a sick woman, running this place with chains and whips—poor Mother Teresa!" As though she found that deluded passion incredible now, she shook her head, slowly. "When I saw that you were going to stay in Carmel, I wrote the Bishop a frantic letter—and of course, when he answered me sensibly, I hated *him*, too. You never knew it, but I even wanted to petition the law courts, to get you out if I could—fortunately, your father still had his head on." Memories heavy in her eyes, she looked at Clare. "Will the Lord ever forgive me?"

"Oh, long ago," Clare said reassuringly. "He makes allowances." She remembered one thing her mother had said, suffering through those first days after Father had died: "When I feel I cannot bear it any longer, your prayers, and the prayers of Carmel, come to help me—and I can endure it again." Yes, she thought, He *had* made allowances.

"Oh, well," her mother said, visibly cheering, "It's a long time since I was such an idiot. I can assure you now I'm just as happy about you as I am about Linda." She began to gather her handbag, gloves, and Sr. Mary Agnes' emigrant fruitcake. "Maybe even happier? But I have to leave—Mrs. Pomeroy and Mrs. Ferguson are going to eat widow's turkey with me." She did not look depressed at the prospect—although she still missed Clare's father, she had learned to manage without him.

For the last moment before parting, they stood, each close to her side of the grille. Her mother was acquiring a middle-aged comfort with life, Clare thought—she was growing a little stouter, and not minding it, growing grey, and not caring too much. “Keep well, Mother,” Clare said tenderly. “And don’t forget to write.”

“Do I ever?” her mother said. “I’ll see you in three months.”

“In the spring,” Clare said. They exchanged a last, affectionate, reassuring look, and Clare drew the curtain and unfolded the shutters again. The dark fell on the sound of her mother’s departing footsteps, and on the Carmelites’ side of the parlour.

Out of the blackness, Sr. Paul’s soft, strained voice spoke. “Sister, I know you told me your mother had been very unhappy when you entered, but I didn’t realize she had been *that* unhappy. Why, even my mother hasn’t considered petitioning in the law courts!”

She may yet, Clare thought, and waited in the warm darkness, in which she could imagine she heard Sr. Paul’s troubled mind moving about, like a restless, unseen spirit.

“If *your* mother could change so completely, couldn’t mine change, too?” Sr. Paul said. “Perhaps God means the way she feels about Carmel to be her cross to carry for a while—and mine. As you and your mother carried it—until He took it away.” Sr. Paul sighed, and her beads rattled with the depth of the sigh. “Surely He can change my mother?”

Paul had not been a Carmelite long enough, Clare reflected, to realize how many things He *could* change. “You should know He can turn a grain of sand—or obliterate the Universe,” she said quietly.

Another bead-rattling sigh was followed by a sudden swish of robes and habit, as though Sr. Paul was coming to life. “Then my mother should be no problem,” she said. “When

she comes, I am going to tell her I have decided to stay in Carmel—once and for all.”

There was a sturdiness, a hard backbone, in the young voice that Clare had not heard before. *This* time she means it, she thought. She paused just long enough to give the Lord a brief thanksgiving because He had chosen to enlighten the darkness in Sr. Paul's little head, then she opened the door into the sunny hall. “It may not be a happy visit,” she said. “But you can acquire great virtue from it—if you don't become angry, or hurt. Now, get your rubbers and shawl. I want you to take a long walk in the garden.” A rosy-checked novice was a good thing to show a disgruntled mother.

When Sr. Paul, wearing her big rubbers and shawl, had been shepherded out to the snowy garden, once again Sr. Mary Clare walked down the corridor toward Mother Teresa's office. She walked slowly; she felt weary as well as elated. Weary, because it seemed to her she had been on the other end of Paul's erratic seesaw, going up and down with her—elated, because she thought that at least once she had fulfilled Mother Chrysostom's prophecy of her; surely, she had done a great thing for the Lord? In His small army, Sr. Paul would have the weapons, the armour, the strength of ten.

Her mind at ease, she went into Mother Teresa's office, where the Prioress was just ending a letter with her signature. The pen, as controlled as the hand that guided it, wrote *Mother Teresa of God* before she looked at Clare, who had knelt and kissed the Prioress' scapular. “Yes, Sister?” she said, quietly.

“I am so happy to tell you, Reverend Mother,” Clare said. “It worked out as I hoped. Sister Paul is going to stay with us.”

Gazing at Sr. Clare just long enough to shake her thoroughly, Mother Teresa picked up the finished letter. “Now look at this signature, Sister,” she said. “And tell me the meaning of the initials after my name?”

At once, Clare knew that something, somehow, had gone terribly wrong; under her heavy robes, she felt the sudden springing of sweat. "D.C., u.," she said, slowly. "D.C.' means Discalced Carmelite." Surely, after fifty years in religion, Mother Teresa *knew* she was a shoeless Carmelite?

"But the small 'u', Sr. Mary Clare:" the Prioress prodded. "The small, but all important, 'u'?"

"It means 'unworthy'," Clare said, in a voice as small as the *u*. She did not know what was coming, but now she knew from what direction—in a room full of sunshine, the wind was in the east. She did not resent it, because Mother Teresa's justice was as faultless as the Lord's, but neither did she understand it. In everything to do with Sr. Paul today, she had consulted, and reported, and obtained permission—yet she felt sure that Sr. Paul, that little newly confirmed Carmelite, was the reason she knelt, perspiring, before Mother Teresa's sombre gaze.

"And it is intended to remind us," Mother Teresa said, "everyone, from the Prioress to the youngest girl who has hardly learned to put her veil on straight, that a Carmelite is nothing if she is not humble. Nothing, Sister Clare." She withdrew the letter and put it to one side. "Nothing at all." When she looked at Clare again, the eyes, usually so kind, had an impersonal fierceness in them that was daunting.

"It is *extraordinary*," she said, "after everything Mother Rosaria and I said to you about it, that you failed again. In the strongest terms, you were warned to stop meddling with Paul and her vocation—nevertheless, to do that very thing, you put on a dramatic show in the parlour!" Wearily, she looked down at her old, delicate hands, folded on the polished desk. "My permission to let you do it puzzles you? When I could have stopped you, corrected you, with a word? I was hoping you would stop yourself, correct yourself—it is far better when correction comes from within than from without." She got up

and went to the window, facing the garden's glory of sunshine and snow, her back a triangle of dark robes that darkened the room. "I hoped until the very last moment when I saw you at the parlour door with the little sister. But no, nothing stopped the ambitious novice-mistress—no prudence, no wisdom, and alas, no humility. Why have you failed to understand that in this matter of Sr. Paul, *you* have been Mother Rosaria's and my chief concern? Surely, we made it plain enough! Have you grown dense, Sister Mary Clare?"

Dense, dense as the blackest night, Clare thought. She knelt without moving, her hands clasped under her scapular, her face filling with a flush. And proud, she said to herself, proud as Lucifer before his long and darkening fall. With deaf ears and blind eyes, she had plunged, like him. "Reverend Mother, I am truly sorry," she said.

"And I—you don't know *how* sorry," the Prioress said, motionless at the window, as though the garden, in its perfection of new snow, was a pleasanter sight than this foolish nun, upon her knees. "Why is humility so hard to learn?" She turned suddenly. "Of course, you are no longer novice-mistress, Sister Clare." The anger that had sharpened her voice had changed to a cold gravity. "I am going to put Mary Joseph in your place. She is somewhat timid, but she *has* humility—and I think it would be an agreeable change."

The grandness of her lost station falling about her in shreds and patches like autumn leaves, Clare did not look up at Mother Teresa. That she was no longer novice-mistress hurt and shamed her, but the reason she was not went as deep into her as a sword. A Carmelite who had failed to learn humility had failed to learn Carmel's—and God's—great lesson. For several moments she knelt in silence, before she said in a small voice, "Reverend Mother, I understand you at last."

"If you truly do, all this will not have been a complete

waste," Mother Teresa said, sitting down at her desk once more. "I am going to give you a special penance, to assist your approach to humility." A gleam, quickly gone, lightened the disapproval in her pale face. "As long as I think it is needful, every day, for an hour of your free time, you will try to help Sister Malachy clear up her endless confusion about the Rubrics." The Prioress drew another sheet of paper toward her, and inserted it in the typewriter. "With the special admonition, that as you work with her, you are *never* to allow yourself to think that poor Sister Malachy is very stupid, and you are very bright. Because I assure you, I cannot but feel that Sister Malachy is far more pleasing to the Lord! He shows a preference for *little* ones."

"Yes, Reverend Mother," Clare said, too shattered even to contemplate what teaching the Rubrics to Sr. Malachy would mean.

"And Sister Clare," Mother Teresa said, in a gentler voice, "remember, in Carmel, as in the world, when one seems to come to an end, one may only be coming to a better beginning."

"Yes, Reverend Mother," Clare said. "Do you wish me to start teaching Sister Malachy today?"

"Let us not spoil Sister Malachy's Christmas," the Prioress said dryly. "Tomorrow will do just as well." The sound her typewriter made as she rolled the paper down into it was like the sound of the wheels of Carmel, starting to turn again after an obstruction had been removed from the road. "You may go, Sister Clare. And send Mary Joseph to me."

"Yes, Reverend Mother—" Clare said, rising from her knees, bowing.

She shut the office door behind her and came out into the sunlit hall. Distantly, in the community room, she heard the chatter of happy voices, but it was silent around Clare where

she stood, trying to pick up her changed life in religion. Novice-mistress no longer, she was only a humble, and humbled, Carmelite. She started to walk slowly along the hall, steadying her self for the cheerful babble that would meet her in the community room. After she had given the Prioress' message to Mary Joseph, she would go to the choir and pray.

As Mother Teresa had said, she was at the beginning again. And a Carmelite began with God.



III

THE LORD'S WAYS
ARE IN A TEMPEST,
AND A WHIRLWIND

Nahum 1:3





OUTSIDE the choir's open window the warm September night was dark, leaden, still, and the monastery itself was filled with the special hush of the Great Silence. The last soft footstep had left the choir, and the newly elected prioress, chosen that day, was alone. This morning, a bird in a well-filled nest, she had been one among many. Tonight, separated from her sisters by the great honour they had given her, answerable only to God and to the Holy Rule, she felt the weight of that honour like a cross upon her back.

Kneeling in front of her prioress' chair, Mother Mary Clare of Divine Wisdom wished, for one brief moment, that she could roll up thirty-two years like a carpet, and be only a postulant again. Instead of twenty souls, a postulant had just one to take care of, her own. To a postulant, the niggling anxieties of financing a convent that lived on alms meant no more than to a fat robin in the garden. And that an ancient, worn-out monastery must be replaced soon, somehow, would not worry her either—Reverend Mother would see to it.

But *I* am Reverend Mother, Clare said to herself, and there is no way of going back. In the sixteen years since her brief disaster as novice-mistress, she had been trained, and guided, and shaped by Mother Teresa with a zeal that Clare knew now had pointed to just this moment; she had held nearly every post in the monastery except that of Provisor—a few days' intense study and her hands should fit the Prioress' reins. Nevertheless, she felt unworthy. Who could feel worthy to follow Mother Teresa as a prioress of Carmel?—or the great St. Teresa, who had planted monasteries like diamonds all over Spain? "My strength is perfected in thy weakness," the Lord had said. All the same, Clare wished that Mother Teresa's earthly advice were still within reach; she needed that astringent blend of sharp wisdom and forbearing patience. But Mother Teresa had died two weeks ago, great in age and holiness, and all that was left of her were her worn prayer books and a memory that would long outlast them.

From the Refectory, on the floor below, Clare heard the sliding sound of windows being closed quietly; Sr. Joachim, the Vigilatrix, was starting to shut up the monastery for the night. With a last, strengthening look at the still choir—its dim, praying statues, its vigil lights shining without motion in the heavy air, and its presence of God—Clare rose from her knees.

In the corridor outside, except for Sr. Joachim's small, scrupulous noises, the silence was profound, and the old monastery enclosed that silence, lapped in velvet from basement to belfry; the nuns were in their cells, and no Carmelite walked stairs or landings.

As Clare went by, she saw that the Confession List had been hung beside the choir door; in the morning, Father Anselm would hear confessions. She paused to look at the list. There they were, their names, written on white cards in Mary Joseph's elegant chancery script—and she saw that Mary Joseph

had lost no time. *Sister Mary Clare's* card had been removed, and at the very top, like *Abou Ben Adhem*, the new card of *Mother Mary Clare* led all the rest. That *Mary Joseph* was to be her sub-prioress was a fortifying thought; with the years, her old friend had grown in knowledge and skill and grace with God—her wit and common sense would be a staff to Clare's right hand.

Standing there in the enfolding silence, she studied the names. Through her years in religion, old nuns had died, young nuns had come; the list changed, like *Mary Agnes' garden* in winter and spring, but there was always a list, and there always would be as long as *Carmel* lasted. *Elias*, the *Vestier*, Clare thought, numbering them over, *Mary Agnes*, *Malachy*, the *Infirmarian*—her one gift, to take patient care of the sick, had been fortunately discovered—little *Carmelita*, the white novice, who rang the *Angelus* bell not too late but too soon, *Mother Rosaria*, who lay bedridden in the *Infirmary*, her bright and polished wits now clouded by old age. And *Sr. Paul*, *Sr. Dominic*, *Sr. Alberta*, the novice-mistress, *Sr. Raphael*, the *Provisor*—all the others. Clare pondered each of the twenty, souls and bodies, to be guided to God by her, to be fed, clothed, and sheltered by her. In two days, there would be twenty-one names—a new postulant was being added, green as spring grass, and just as hopeful.

Clare could hear *Sr. Joachim*, still on the floor below, closing and latching the kitchen windows. It would be an embarrassment to *Sr. Joachim* if she found the *Prioress*, who could not be closed, latched, and turned off like a light. Yet she lingered a moment longer, this time glancing at the *Bulletin Board*, and the bits of white paper pinned to it as though they were moths' wings. The Board held no worldly news; the moths' wings were requests for prayer—from now on, it would be her duty to decide which bits of paper should go on the board. "Sr.

Paul's mother," she read, "asks prayers for a special intention." That Mrs. Foster should ask for Carmelite prayers was no longer even ironical—the miracles of time, and the Lord, had reshaped Mrs. Foster into a great lover of Carmelites.

Clare turned away and began to walk quickly up the stairs. She had gained no weight, but sometimes, at forty-eight years, she could feel the long, soaring stairs, and she preferred to act as though she did not. Behind her, Sr. Joachim was quietly putting out lights—darkness was crasing the lower halls.

As Clare crossed the upper landing, she paused and opened the Infirmary door, gently. It was dark within, but she could hear even breathing, which meant Mother Rosaria was asleep, and that was good. Sometimes at night the old nun woke and cried with the pain of her aching bones, the pain of her wandering mind, and Sr. Malachy could be heard coming quickly, to soothe and comfort the child Rosaria had become.

Clare closed the door and went on down the hall. For the last time, since tomorrow she would move into the larger, corner cell of the Prioress, she entered the cell she had had for so many years. The still air of the small room was fresh; someone had opened the window for her, removed and folded the brown coverlet of her pallet, and left behind a steaming pitcher of water covered with a white towel. Within the firm limits of the Rule, the Carmelites cherished their Reverend Mother like a queen bee—more than anything else, the simple services, which up to now she had always had to do for herself, showed Clare how high she had risen.

But it is a cold height, she thought, standing at the open window, and, as she had often heard Mother Teresa say, a lonely one. Along the row of cells a few lights were still on; they shone out into the green world of the great apple tree which had been hardly more than a sapling when Clare was young, too. Shut as she was herself in the quiet of the Great

Silence, she could hear the loud, restless panting of the city, beyond the high monastery walls. The air was motionless, thick, oppressively heavy. This morning, while she had still been Turn Sister, a visitor had spoken anxiously of a hurricane that was threatening. Clare hoped it would not come, but if the Lord chose to send a hurricane to try an inexperienced prioress, she would have to cope with it.

Even as she stood there, the lights along the row of cells went out, one by one, and the apple tree withdrew into the darkness of the night. Taking a deep breath, Clare straightened her back. She refused to be one of those prioresses she had heard about, who had picked up the burden with regrets, with tears.

Turning from the dark window she began to undress, quickly. A new prioress might begin with a good night's sleep.

As Clare entered the kitchen the next morning, Sr. Mary Agnes was busy. Sleeves folded back, coarse work apron tied around her spreading waist, she was washing chipped white mugs; a row of battered veterans was already in the long rack beside her. Turning for a moment from the steaming pan, Mary Agnes glanced at Sr. Raphael. "Sometimes I think when a new prioress comes in, it would be lovely if some new china came with her."

"Holy Poverty," the Provisor reminded her absently. A young nun, her clearheaded gift for ordering and providing frugally long since discovered and made use of, she was sitting at the work table. A stub of pencil in her hand, she was about to write on a piece of brown paper, carefully sheared from one of the grocer's bags. "Mr. Donergan has oil, and plumbers' candles. I'll ask Reverend Mother. If the lights go out, she won't want to use our best beeswax any more than I would."

"Probably the lights *won't* go out, Sisters," Clare said. At the sound of the clapper for rising, she had got up in the

darkness and silence of the heavy morning and laid her hands firmly, and bravely, on her new office. "Hurricanes are erratic—it may well dodge us completely."

Sr. Raphael leaped to her feet; Mary Agnes dropped her worn dishrag. Yesterday morning they would not have bowed to her, and might well have given her a debate about hurricanes. Today, their bows were infinitely deep; their respectful faces said so great was a Prioress that any storm would hurry back into the sea at her simplest word.

Clare had seen it operate often—the sudden elevation of the newly elected to this remote, lonely perfection—and she had expected it, but she found it somewhat depressing. The Reverend Mother could joke with her sisters, tease them, talk gaily with them, but it was rather like throwing a conversational ball that was never thrown back hard; received gratefully, it was either tucked away in a capacious brown sleeve or returned like a bit of thistledown.

"However," she said, accepting this separation because she had to, "it wouldn't be prudent to guess about it—the oil and candles had better be ordered." From the turn, Sr. Paul whom Clare had appointed to fill her own vacated post there, had carried to her Mrs. Phelps' warning that radio and TV were now trumpeting alarm about the storm. Still out in the ocean, a whirlpool of savage fury, it was boiling slowly along toward the East Coast. "If it gets here, it can't possibly do it before tomorrow, so we have plenty of time." TV and radio were unknown quantities to Clare—who had never seen either one of them—but she was glad, as she sat down at the table, that they were excluded from Carmel; enough echoes of their magpie chatter came through the turn as it was. "Go on with your work, Sisters," she said.

The steady thundering of the heavy crockery resumed, and Sr. Raphael seated herself across the table, sharpened pencil

stub poised above the brown paper, hazel eyes respectfully awaiting revelation, as though Clare were a new St. John.

I am no different than I was yesterday, Clare thought, I know no more, but her young provisor fortunately did not seem to realize that. So Clare opened her notebook to its virgin first page, suspended her own pencil above it, and said firmly, "Be *sure* to order enough candles and oil, Sister—they'll always keep." Sr. Raphael was such a careful provider that she had a tendency to come down to the very last egg and butter pat. Once Mr. Donergan had been heard to say that that holy Carmelite, Sr. Raphael, was so near with her ordering she was his Purgatory on earth.

"Yes, Reverend Mother, I'll see to it," Sr. Raphael said, calculations flashing behind her bright eyes and ending on the brown paper in words and figures. Again her pencil poised expectantly.

For one moment, Clare wished that Mother Teresa's grooming and training had included a session as Provisor—by plenty of practice, the little nun across the table knew so much more than she did, who knew a provisor's duties only in theory. But there was no escaping that hovering pencil, those hovering eyes. "How is the coal supply, Sister?" Clare said because it was the first thing that occurred to her.

"The bins are full, Mother," Sr. Raphael said, looking a little astonished. In spite of the open windows, the air in the big kitchen hung dull, stagnant, and hot, like a tropical soup—the coal supply probably seemed an odd thing to talk about. "To the top. We always order in the spring, when it's cheapest."

"Oh, excellent—" Clare said, writing in her notebook. "Coal—the bins are full." But how much did coal cost? Once she had heard Mother Teresa say it was going so high it must have reached the holy angels—but how high was that? She suppressed a sigh as she looked into Sr. Raphael's shining eyes,

and realized that all the information inside the Provisor's head was going to have to be transferred to hers—without, if possible, giving Sr. Raphael the idea that *she* was better fitted to run the monastery. Plunge into it, Clare thought. "Now then, Sister Raphael," she began in a businesslike voice.

By the time Sr. Raphael and she had finished with each other, Clare knew just how much of the world's money it took to manage the monastery, to feed and clothe its inhabitants, to keep it going smoothly within the austere limits of Carmelite poverty. It was all tucked away within her brain, and her notebook, and she thought she had managed, with the possible assistance of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, or St. Teresa perhaps, to keep one quick step ahead of smart Sr. Raphael.

She rose, and folded the notebook in her hand. She was going to visit the novitiate. And she also wanted to walk through the monastery, and look at it, for the first time, with the responsible eyes of the Prioress. She decided she would examine the monastery before she saw the novitiate. "Continue your work, Sisters," she said, and once more she was chastened by the greatness of the respect with which they bowed.

An hour later, she had gone over the building inch by inch, studying it all, from the rusty-mouthed furnace in its cellars to the tired, curling brown shingles on its roof. It was a monument to Carmelite ability to wire together, patch up, make do, and it was, she thought, in the perilous condition of the wonderful one-horse shay just before it collapsed. There was hardly anything in it that functioned well, except the nuns—there was hardly anything that should not be replaced at once, from the small oven, starred with burned-out holes, that baked the altar breads to the frayed-haired rope that rang the great bell. Even the bell itself, which had sent its notes of prayer over the city for sixty years, was marred by a meandering crack that began at its iron lip.

Her tour of inspection over, she stood at the window of Our Lady's polished, empty cell, where she had come to think alone—and thought hard about the reasons for the monastery's dilapidation. Mother Teresa had hated to touch her precious Building Fund for large repairs; she had kept it sacred, adding to it every donation she could, like a pious squirrel—rather than diminish the Fund, she had preferred to patch, and pray, and write to Bishop Porter. Perhaps, in her old age, she had come to rely too much on prayer, too little on action. Even in Carmel, Clare said to herself, life must be a mixture of both—or ruin takes over. Had she been elected, had He chosen her, to get His Carmelites a new monastery? Was that why she was Prioress?



Looking out on the late-summer glory of the garden, she examined her thoughts carefully. Was there any pride in what she wanted? Any ambition, or self-seeking? She did not think so, but, on an occasion many years ago, she could remember Mother Teresa saying, "Talk to God about it, and when you do, keep what Sister Mary Clare wants out of the discussion." I will do just that, Clare said to herself. All the same, that the Lord must have appointed her to get the new monastery seemed heavenly as well as earthly logic.

Below Clare, in the garden, Sr. Mary Agnes was demonstrating prayer in action. With a sturdy faith in the ability of slender wooden stakes to withstand, perhaps, a hurricane, she was bobbing along the rows like a fat brown and white robin as she tied up her chrysanthemum plants.

It *may* well come, Clare said to herself, because the day was as grey as though the sun had been obliterated, and the heavy, motionless air was silently oppressive; great storms sent before them just such a solemn messenger. Hurricane or not, she thought, watching Sr. Mary Agnes, what was to be done about the monastery?

Shutting her eyes, she waited, because the best way to pray was to stand quiet, with the senses closed against the world. When she opened her eyes again, Sr. Mary Agnes had trotted indoors, leaving the chrysanthemums behind her like prisoners tied stiffly to the stake, and Clare had decided what to do.

No more than Mother Teresa did she wish to destroy the Building Fund just to renovate an ancient monastery that would still be ancient when all the money had been spent. She would write another letter to Bishop Porter, but a different one from the sort Mother Teresa had written—Clare had always believed that Mother Teresa's letters to him had been too gentle, too humble, and tended to put the word *no* in his mouth. Hers would be different. Most courteous, of course, she told herself, but firm, persuasive, eloquent, and loaded with facts and figures, since bishops loved facts and figures.

After I see the novitiate, she thought, because to the professed nun she had been until yesterday the young novices were almost strangers, and they must not be to their prioress—I will write that letter, and it will be a good one. With one last look at the Virgin's tiny, polished room, and one last prayer to her who lived in it as she lived in all of Carmel, Clare left the cell.

As she approached the open door of the novitiate, she heard

the clear, patient voice of Sr. Mary Alberta, raised in instruction.

"Now," the novice-mistress was saying, "for tomorrow's lesson I want you to do a map for me, from memory—the lands of the Hebrew captivities. Sister Mary Sebastian, I would like you to work hard on the Hebrews—from your charity's last map, I got the impression they had been somewhere in Russia!"

Oh, poor children, Clare thought; the bedrock on which a Carmelite was built was often pretty heavy stuff—from her own novitiate, she could remember those tedious captivities only too well. And today the novices would be alive with an excitement that must make the Hebrews duller than ever—because the new prioress was coming to visit them this morning, and tomorrow a new postulant was entering. In the quiet of Carmel, such striking events rang in young blood like fifes and drums.

When Clare came in, Alberta and her two charges were sitting at the plain wooden table. The novices' faces, pink and translucent with youth, and their pencils and open notebooks, gave the bare little place an innocent schoolroom air. At once, the three nuns went to their knees before her—Sr. Mary Alberta with a practised grace the others lacked. It took time for the proper Carmelite polish, physical as well as spiritual.

Clare's hand touched the white veils bowed before her in blessing, and then, because Sr. Alberta asked, "Reverend Mother, may *I* have your blessing?" she blessed her as well, before she lifted Sr. Alberta to her feet with a gesture—it was always good to keep the novice-mistress well elevated above her flock.

"Reverend Mother," Sr. Alberta said, "this is Sister Mary Sebastian, and Sister Carmelita." Without words, her voice somehow managed to convey to the novices that if *they* got up

from their knees, or spoke to the Prioress, the roof would certainly fall in on them when she left; Clare could remember that Mother Rosaria had had that same priceless skill.

"Sister Alberta tells me you've both made a fine beginning," Clare said. Encouragement from the Reverend Mother was a wonderfully cheering thing to the novitiate, exposed as it was to the constant, and necessary, scourings and abrasions of the novice-mistress. Not too much encouragement, though, she said to herself—Carmel's road was long and stern. "But it's only a beginning. There is no such thing, ever, as a *finished* Carmelite, a perfect Carmelite, until God takes us back into His hands." Thoughtfully, she looked at them; they were so young that hardly anything was written on their faces except excellence of purpose, good humour, and good health—and yet within their shapeless newness might be a budding saint. Sr. Alberta, who complained frequently that spoiled modern girls were as difficult to train as fireflies, thought highly of these. "I want you to follow the Rule with ardour, and listen to every word Sr. Alberta says, because the Lord speaks to you through her." I mustn't say *too* much, she thought; the full



magnificence of the great illuminated book of Carmel was too rich for the nursery stage. "And when Barbara enters tomorrow, be sure to set her a good example. Above all, Sisters," she added, "be gay! It wonderfully lightens the Rule, the captivities, and the scrubbing brush." If the great St. Teresa could say, "O Lord, deliver us from gloomy saints!" so could she; it was advice as splendid as that shining Carmelite. Now I have given them enough to chew over, she told herself, blessed them once more, and left the novitiate. As she went out, the bell for confession began to ring, far down in the monastery.

When Clare reached the lower hall, she saw that the confession line was already starting to form by the choir door, and was pleased to notice Sr. Dominic on it. Sr. Dominic, whose soul was as immaculate as an angel's, was nevertheless troubled by scruples, and it generally took Father Anselm a good half hour to eradicate them. Her presence on the line would give Clare time enough to write ten letters to ten bishops before her own confession. Marshalling clear, forceful arguments, already face to face with Bishop Porter, she went down the hall to her office.

It was a superb letter. First, it announced that she had been elected Prioress, and asked for the Bishop's prayers. It went on to request his approval for the erection of a new monastery, and eloquently, skilfully, with firmness but in the best of tempers, accompanied by a mountainous documentation of facts and figures, explained why a new monastery was imperative. It ended with the strongly expressed wish that he would come, at his earliest convenience, for a visit of inspection.

With a long breath of relief, Clare signed and sealed it—her mind had been charging at top speed for half an hour and was tired of argument. Then she went down the hall once more, dropped the letter on the shelf in the turn room, and, withdrawing her thoughts from the Bishop, the monastery, and

everything but herself and God, went in to the choir to make her confession.

Afterwards, as she was leaving the choir again, she heard the postman's sharp double ring. Trained by years of Carmelite serenity, he would wait with patience for the buzz^e that would open the front door to him. Sr. Paul was approaching at an even, unhurried pace. Stepping into the doorway of the community room, Clare beckoned her. "There's a letter on the shelf that Father Anselm is going to take directly to the Bishop for me," she said. "Don't mail it, Sister."

Sr. Paul bowed respectfully and disappeared into the tiny turn room. In a moment the buzzer gave its deep hum, and the turn went around, with a windy whoop of air. Since every letter that entered Carmel must sift through the hands of the Prioress, Clare remained in the doorway, using the moment to recommend Bishop Porter to the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. She was not afraid; she was sure he would be enlightened. She had done her best, and she knew that it was very good.

Soon, Sr. Paul came out of the turn room. She was holding a few letters and the notebook used for messages from the world. As she reached Clare she gave her the book, as well as the letters. "Reverend Mother," she said calmly, "everyone who has come to the turn this morning has been very worried about the storm."

Clare looked at her. The young nun who had bobbed up and down like a seesaw over whether she should stay or go had developed as Clare had thought she would—into a splendid religious. She was steadfast, prudent, alight with the inner joy that marks the good nun, warm with her sisters, and greatly warm with the Lord. Mrs. Foster's daughter had made a proper Carmelite.

Clare glanced at the notebook, and Sr. Paul's neat, well-

balanced handwriting. The warnings were there, beginning with Mrs. Phelps and Father Anselm, and increasing in intensity until they reached Mrs. Dodd, whose tone was somewhat hysterical, but had been faithfully copied by Sr. Paul, *Mrs. Dodd says that the Weather Bureau says that the hurricane will certainly strike the East Coast, and will be very violent. It will begin in this area late tonight, and she implores the sisters to take all possible precautions.* Clare, who knew Mrs. Dodd well from her own sessions at the turn, eliminated some of the emotion. Nevertheless her message, and the others, more temperate, but still alarmed, could not be disregarded by a wise Mother Superior.

"There's no need to post *these* on the Bulletin Board, Sister," Clare said. The older nuns would have read them with tranquillity, but the novitiate might flutter—they were not yet far enough away from the world to have achieved Carmelite steadiness, in the face of anything, from spiritual aridity, to natural disasters.

"Yes, Reverend Mother," Sr. Paul said.

For a moment longer, Clare continued to study the pencilled warnings on the page. Well, she thought, in her years in religion, just about everything had come through that turn, from Adolf Hitler, to the Russian Bear—a hurricane could be little worse. "Sister, will you call Mother Mary Joseph and tell her I would like to see her? I'll be either in the Hermitage or in the garden."

"Yes, Reverend Mother," Paul said, kneeling with grace, kissing the hem of Clare's long brown scapular.

As Clare went down the shabby, paint-scabbed wooden steps of the porch and into the garden, behind her she heard the soft tones of the community bell, summoning Mary Joseph. There was a curious, dead stillness in the heavy air, a motionless, breathless pause; the leaves of the great apple tree, the grapevines, Mary Agnes' tightly budded chrysanthemums,

might have been moulded in green steel. Even the pulse of the city, beyond the high stone walls, was a muffled pulse, as though its blood ran thick and slow.

Not the Hermitage today, Clare thought. When the Carmelites had given up keeping chickens, the hen house had been enlarged and converted into a Hermitage, where a nun might go who wished to escape even the muted noises of the monastery. However, the old boards had been made use of, with a proper respect for poverty, and in hot and sultry weather you were not alone in the Hermitage—generations of chickens were there too, an unheavenly host. The mind intent on prayer was apt to find itself pondering disinfectants.

So, instead, she sat down on the bench under the apple tree, after first prodding the seat with a cautious finger; young Sr. Carmelita was very fond of a paintbrush, and used it on everything she could get permission to paint.

The letters resting on her knee, Clare looked at the Carmel for which she was responsible, looming brown and ancient above her. Not new when the Carmelites had bought it sixty years ago, it now had the hopeless look of the very old, the very poor. But her inspection of it was cheerful, because she did not see it—she saw the monastery that would take its place, where nuns could work and pray without the irritating distractions of having to be carpenters and plumbers as well. For a moment she dreamed, the new building covering the shabby old one like a brilliant veil, and then, once more forcefully recommending Bishop Porter to the Holy Spirit, picked up the top letter of the heap. The "S. Prentice" in the left corner, and the young, unformed hand that pranced all over the envelope, told her it came from Linda's daughter.

When she had finished it, she read it again, puzzled. Odd, very odd, she said to herself. Brief, and mystifyingly solemn, it said that Susan wanted to talk over something, and was coming

to see her. *A matter of the gravest importance* was underlined. Coming today, Clare saw, glancing at the date. On her first day as Prioress, she did not feel she required a sixteen-year-old's matter of the gravest importance. Moreover, Susan's visit would prevent Clare's seeing the rest of her family for another three months. But perhaps the child really needs me, she thought—and she loved Susan. Whatever it was, she would have to see to it.

With a feeling of relief, she put the letter back with the others—the monastery door had opened and shut, and Mary Joseph was coming down the path toward her. By now, the years had taken a little of the swift spring from Mary Joseph and added a little plumpness to her tall frame—she was fond of reminding the young nuns she had passed the half-century mark, and was deserving of respect.

She is, Clare thought, watching her approaching. Time, and the constant Carmelite struggle for perfection, had rooted out of Mary Joseph her weaknesses—an early timidity, an early tendency to whip about with the winds—and left her strengths, an alert, practical mind full of sunlight, a vigorous love for the Lord that would never falter.

Smiling, Clare got up and went to meet her, her lifted hand preventing Mary Joseph from going to her knees. Clare thought it would take her a long while to be completely at ease with that position of homage—even though she knew the homage was meant for the office she held, not for her.

“Praised be Jesus Christ,” Mary Joseph said.

“May He be forever praised,” Clare said, and together they turned and began to walk down the familiar path they had walked so long, their alpargats making small sound on the crushed stone, their beads and medals jingling cheerfully. “Mary Joseph,” she began, “there’s been such a to-do coming through the turn all morning about a hurricane that we’re

going to be ready, just in case. We can all work at it—for one thing, I want new latches put on those shaky shutters.”

“The novitiate will love it.” Mary Joseph had been novice-mistress more than once, and knew what the novitiate liked. “No study period—” she said as they went past the white-washed walls of the Hermitage, “just screwdrivers, and flip-flap, and delightful confusion.”

“And everything that is loose outdoors we will put in the cellar.” Not that there was much that was loose—Carmels were never messy places, with magpie habits. But there was the bench under the big apple tree, and the clothes dryer, and Mary Agnes’ beloved garden cart—glancing at it, Clare felt a slight shock. In some unsupervised moment, Carmelita’s paintbrush had made a red and yellow zebra out of it—that worldly commotion in a convent garden would have to be repainted.

“Well, let’s hope the storm misses us.” Mary Joseph’s alert dark eyes, still so young, lifted toward the breathless sky and pondered it. “I don’t care for this stillness, though.”

Neither did Clare. It was like a presence large and dangerous, a tiger in the bushes, watching them in silence. The comparison, with a certain failure of charity which she regretted, turned her attention. “Mary Joseph, I’ve written the Bishop, asking him to approve a new monastery. And I asked him to please inspect the monastery *in person*—I didn’t say don’t send the Monsignor again, but that was what I meant.” Monsignor Kevin Roberts, large and quite fierce, was the tiger in the bushes, and Bishop Porter’s sabre-toothed guardian against troublesome Carmelites.

“Oh, *that* one, Lord forgive me,” Mary Joseph said, her eyes returning to earth, with sparks in them. “I can just hear him, as I have more than once. ‘The monastery isn’t beautiful, to be sure, but it’s livable.’ I wish *he* had to live in it, and put up with a water supply on the top floor that comes out in drops, like

diamond., or that tea-strainer roof!" She looked at Clare doubtfully. "Well, let us hope, Reverend Mother," she said. "But poor Mother Teresa wrote letters, too. So many of them!"

"None like this," Clare said with good humour, and great faith, both in her letter and the Holy Spirit. "It would persuade the devil himself. I think we will get our monastery."

Mary Joseph continued to look dubious, and then her face changed—she paused, and drew herself up, with an air of extreme dignity. She was gazing at Sr. Sebastian. The little novice was hanging out laundry in the back garden, while staring at the Prioress; at once, having received Mary Joseph's unspoken message, Sr. Sebastian took command of her eyes—and stumbled over the clothesbasket.

"Novices!" Mary Joseph said, in a resigned tone.

"Oh, she'll learn," Clare said, "we did," and they went on, past the motionless apple tree and Mary Agnes' brilliant zinnias. Their voices blending together in the still and breathless garden, they talked of convent business, which had to do with souls as well as finances, and circled again in their walk, to pause by the lily pool.



From among the green lily pads a few golden noses came up to nibble hopefully at the empty air. "When do we get our latest little fish?" Mary Joseph asked. "I saw her trunk come riding through the big turn this morning."

"About four o'clock tomorrow—depending on train connections." If the trains connected, at four o'clock tomorrow, another young postulant, full of fright and joy, would stand in that deceptively gloomy outer hall of Carmel and wait for the brown door to open. Clare remembered.

"How fortunate for the Lord the supply never runs out!" she said, and they turned quickly, obediently, and began to walk toward the monastery in silence. The bell for Examen had just sounded its clear voice, and even a prioress must hasten to examine her conscience before the searching presence of God.

On such a dark morning the windows of the basement refectory let in little day, and the servers had turned on the lights. Since the dinner was eaten in silence, there were few sounds in the large, echoing room—only the pecking of wooden forks and spoons, and the drone of Sr. Joachim's voice, reading from the lectern like an imprisoned fly.

Too long a Carmelite for her teeth to be set on edge by the Lector's bumble, from which she could pick hardly one word in ten, Mother Mary Clare accepted her as a mortification, as much a part of the religious life as the human skull that rested on the table between her and Mary Joseph. Scrubbed and immaculate as everything in the monastery, its back was to her and her sub-prioress, an unfamiliar view; for thirty-two years, at every meal, she had looked at it from the other direction. On the whole, she thought, she preferred the polished back of its head to its dark and airy eyes—but its purpose remained the same, a stern reminder that pampering the flesh was a waste of earthly time.

Sr. Joachim, Clare said to herself, will certainly have to be told to open her mouth and speak up; entire paragraphs were beginning to slough off into such a mumble that Sr. Joachim might as well have been reading through a muffler—and failings that Clare could ignore or overlook as an ordinary religious, she, as Prioress, was now obliged to correct. All over the room, a slight restlessness showed that the nuns had given up trying to concentrate on spiritual instruction they could not hear. In the new monastery, would a loudspeaker system for the lectern be a blemish on holy poverty? Clare decided that it would, since a wide-open mouth would serve just as well.

The meal was nearly over when Sr. Paul came through the doorway of the refectory, walked behind one of the two long rows of tables, and knelt at Clare's side. "Reverend Mother," she whispered, "your niece is here to see you."

Clare paused only long enough to eat, lest they be wasted, the bread crumbs that had fallen to her biblike napkin, unpin the napkin from her shoulders, and thank the Lord for having given her Mary Agnes' good plain cooking. Susan had been astonishingly prompt, for Susan, and it made her anxious. What was this matter of grave importance? Out in the world even the world's young children could have colossal troubles.

As she passed behind the tables, Clare glanced at the plates of the eating nuns—physical appetites were as much a part of her job as spiritual hunger. Both, she decided, as she left the refectory, are all right. For quite a way, she was followed by Sr. Joachim's mysterious religious buzz; like a persistent fly, it accompanied her until she came up into the spacious, silent, great hall of the monastery.

How sticky and still the air is! she said to herself. The hall, which always seemed alight with wandering breaths from the garden, even on the heaviest days, had a deadness about it that

muffled and dulled the sound of her alpargats, her beads. Upstairs, faintly, from the Infirmary, she heard the troubled sound of Mother Rosaria's wandering voice. The weather oppresses her, Clare thought, sadly, but with acceptance—because she knew Mother Rosaria's darkness on earth must be growing into a great light in eternity. Nevertheless, as she visited the choir, as she walked through the Vestier's room and into the parlour, she prayed that the old nun might have ease.

The small dark room was thick as soup with the motionless odours of wax polish and cloth curtain. Quickly, Clare opened the shutters, and whipped back the curtain. There, in the visitors' part of the parlour, sitting wooden-spined on one of the plain chairs, and looking unnaturally solemn, was her niece.

"Well, Susan!" Clare said fondly, for a moment not quite certain that it *was* Susan. At the time of the last family visit, Susan had been away at school. In those eight months, time had been stepping with giant feet. The girl's puppy fat had been fined away. She had grown taller, and was doing her hair differently. Even the shape of her face had changed; easily, the next giant step could make her into a beauty. "It's so nice to see you, darling," Clare said. It seemed to her that against the austere background of a Carmelite parlour Susan glowed, a shining representative from the world at its best. "It's been a long time!"

"Yes, Reverend Mother," Susan said, astonishingly. "Sr. Paul told me you are Prioress now."

"If I were a thousand Prioresses, I'd still be Aunt Jean to you," Clare said; she did not choose to have her niece, as well, in attitudes of homage before her. And then, alarm blew a loud trumpet note in her. The health of Clare's mother, nearly seventy now, was not good. Had this strangely solemn child brought bad news of the old? "You don't have bad news for me, Susan?"

"Oh, *no!*" The embarrassment of being misunderstood tinged the girl's fine skin with fire. "Grandma's all right now—I just had a letter from Mother. She says Grandma's blood pressure is way down."

And mine is probably up, Clare thought. With a close, affectionate scrutiny, she studied the uncomfortable youngster, sitting so tensely beyond the grille. Clare was puzzled. What caused the solemnity that lay between them, heavier than the heavy air? Susan was as familiar with her Aunt Jean's plain Carmelite parlour as with her own living room—and yet she was, at the moment, as ill at ease as though she had never been there before. But Clare could wait; Carmel had taught her how. "Then this is just a visit," she said smiling. And, as she watched the girl, she wondered, with a sudden pause, of whom Susan reminded her. She did not look like Linda, or Charles, either, but there was something about her that spoke from the past, clearly, into Clare's ear. One by one, fruitlessly, she shuffled the faces of relatives in and out of her memories—the resemblance must be somewhere among them, but it eluded her. Well, she thought, it is a waste of time to play cards with lost faces. And she said, nudging gently after the matter of great importance, "Only a visit?"

"Well, not exactly," Susan said. Her hands, in their bright yellow gloves, gripped each other hard upon her lap; her eyes implored her aunt to understand her, without the words she could not seem to find.

Perhaps it was the yellow gloves, wrapped together in that attitude of prayer, that gave Clare the clue; if you took the gloves off them, the child's hands prayed, as bare as a Carmelite's. Oh, it can't be, she thought, stunned into disbelief—the wheel could not have come around that quickly. And yet perhaps it has, she told herself, studying the wide, dark, excited eyes across from her; it was long enough since *she* had sat, with

a parched mouth, on the other side of this grille and tried to talk to a Reverend Mother.

"Well, Susan," she said soberly, "now tell me what it is."

"I want to enter," Susan said at once, as though Clare's firmness had unlocked her tongue. "It came to me like a flash of light, the other morning at Mass—I haven't even talked to a priest about it. I want to enter here—I want to be a Carmelite."

So it's true, Clare thought. Her eyes intent, she pondered the girl. As a member of the Council, Clare had helped pass on many candidates, but not one so young, or so spectacularly dressed up by God. Not that being only sixteen years old, and almost beautiful, was anything against Susan, but Clare did not believe in vocations that came like flashes of light; they were apt to blow out like matches.

"Why do you want to be a Carmelite, Susan?" she asked. "It's a hard life, and there aren't any cushions."

Susan looked startled, and then almost grieved, as though she had expected open arms and admiration, not arguments. "I don't *know* why," she said, an offended undertone in her voice. "I told you how it came to me, Aunt Jean—like a flash of light."

A true Carmelite knows why, Clare thought. Besides a spectacular adolescent vocation was sometimes more glands than God, and shimmered with a heat that came from earth rather than heaven. It was quite possible some spangle-footed boy had passed Susan by, and she was suffering from hurt feelings—in the past, Clare had helped weed out several candidates with wounds in the heart. Also, with the intuition of an experienced religious, she felt that Susan was of the world; through the grille to Clare came a perfume that did not come from a scent bottle, the delicate, luxurious, tender air of worldliness. Susan would probably do very nicely in life, but not, it seemed to Clare, in the life of Carmel.

"The nuns would have to pass on you too, of course, and they judge vocations very seriously," she said. "And then, it might be a long time before you could enter—until one of us dies. Unless—" She paused. When Barbara Forbes entered tomorrow, the monastery's quota would be full, but, for an extraordinary reason, another lay sister could sometimes be added. The dilapidation of the monastery, which made extra work, might be considered an extraordinary reason—it was certainly extraordinarily dilapidated. "Unless you wanted to come in as a lay sister."

She watched the bright eyes before her, watched them hesitate as they turned over the difference between the white veil and the black, as though Susan were in a department store. This vocation will pass like a spring breeze, Clare said to herself.

"I hadn't considered being a *lay* sister, Aunt Jean," Susan said, in a flattened voice that had lost a good deal of its former fervour. One bright yellow glove curled around her pocket-book in an unconscious gesture of preparing for departure. "I don't think my vocation is to be a *lay* sister."

"You're very young, Susan," Clare said kindly. "There's so much time before you, plenty of time."

Susan and she looked at each other. If Clare were not wrong, a relieved light began to brighten her niece's face, like the light on the face of one who had, for a moment, hung over a spectacular precipice, and then decided to back off and save her life. Clare had seen such a look before, when false candidates wilted in the parlour. "We can talk about it again," she said. "If you wish to. When you're older, darling."

"Oh, yes, Aunt Jean," Susan said. She jumped to her feet, and for a moment stood indecisively fiddling, with the sleeves of her sweater, her pocketbook. "As you say, it's a big step. Well, I ought to go." Eyes confused and warm, she gazed at

Clare. "And please, you and the sisters be careful—there's so much news about a bad storm coming."

"We will," Clare said, wondering why people in the world seemed to think that Carmelites, because they were out of the world, were out of their wits, too. She looked at Susan fondly. The child was beautiful, and—even if in error—she had thought of a Carmelite vocation, which had pleased Clare almost as much as it had startled her. "You be careful, too. Give my love to your father—and to your mother when she gets back from Florida."

For a moment Clare listened to the sound of Susan's high heels departing; the cheerfulness of their clatter reassured her that she had not disappointed a genuine candidate. She had done nothing but prick an emotional bubble.

With a feeling of relief, she swished the curtain shut, rattling the shutters back into place and herself into darkness. And with the darkness, she knew, suddenly, why she had felt that strange and teasing resemblance in her niece's face. Susan, who did not look like her father and mother, looked exactly as she, Clare, had looked at sixteen. It was her own early self she had seen in the parlour, just as Susan, unknowing, had seen, on the other side of the grille, her own middle age.

Well, Clare realized, with some amusement, because she had not inspected her face in a mirror for thirty-two years, *I was pretty*. And there, she said to herself as she threaded her way through the clot of chairs in the darkened room, the resemblance ends. Because, if Mother Teresa had offered her a lay sister's humble role as the key to Carmel, she would have been a lay sister to this day. Which would have saved me from being Prioress, she thought, opening the door into the dark sultry corridor, where the voices of the nuns at recreation chirped like distant birds.

When she had visited the choir, customary after a brush with

even as guileless a representative of the world as Susan, Clare opened the door of the community room. The lights glowed in the large room, and whatever hovered, ominous and gloomy, beyond the windows stayed out; the nuns, talking, their busy fingers flying on the small tasks they kept for recreation, looked secure and safe.

Seeing her, they stood, with smiling faces, because recreation was never quite the same without the Prioress. She felt the warmth of their unspoken welcome flow toward her.

"Go on with your recreation, Sisters," she said, glancing about. On Sr. Joachim's lap was a cigar box full of coloured silks which she was sorting, and Clare stopped by her. "I'll help your charity with these, Sister Joachim," she said, borrowed a handful of the shining, soft things, and went up to her prioress' chair beside Mary Joseph's.

Sitting down, she spread the silks on her lap and began to separate them into sheep and goats. Like anything that came into Carmel from the world, some were beautiful, some ugly. The garish colours, the poor materials, that would never be allowed out into the world again, were kept for the Philistines in the novitiate—whose early attempts at making the beautiful, delicate little Gospels and reliquaries were not always allowed out either.

"Well, Mother Mary Joseph," Clare said, "do you believe in vocations that come like a flash of light?"

"Generally, no, Reverend Mother," Mary Joseph said. Its folds enveloping her like frosting on a wedding cake, she was mending a rip in a lace altar cloth, her dark eyes absorbed. "You mean you saw a flash of light in the parlour?"

"Susan," Clare said, and Mary Joseph looked astonished. "But when I told her the only opening would be as a lay sister, the light went out. I'm just as well pleased. It could have caused awkwardness." Blood-warmth might have inclined her toward

making a pet of her niece, but Carmelite integrity would have bent her in the other direction—and the postulant's early start was hard enough without an over stern prioress. "One member of a family is plenty for a Carmel. Yet, of course—there was always Lisieux."

"As full of Martins as peas in a pod," Mary Joseph said. "And we know what beauty came out of that."

"St. Thérèse," Clare said, with great respect. "But, somehow, I don't see a St. Susan, so it is just as well. Mary Joseph, do the sisters seem at all worried about the hurricane?"

"No, Reverend Mother." Mary Joseph held up the altar cloth to examine the former rip; it had disappeared as though it had never been. "I don't see any signs of nervousness—unless you count Sr. Joachim."

"I don't," Clare said. Sr. Joachim had been known to try to take refuge under her pallet when thunder roared over the roof. No matter how often her sisters pointed out that storms as well as sunshine were part of God's plan—they were never part of Sr. Joachim's plan. "If it comes, we must remember how frightened she gets."

"Yes, Reverend Mother," Mary Joseph said, without a great deal of sympathy; *she* enjoyed standing at a window to watch the lightning when its brilliant bent swords slashed the sky.

"Well," Clare said, looking at the homely, battered clock. Recreation was nearly over. "Sisters," she began, and the nuns laid down their work and talk to look at her, "there have been a great many warnings about this hurricane." Thinking of Sr. Joachim, she added, "Which may never come, of course—it might well go out to sea, as they often do. But Carmelites shouldn't lack prudence. So we will go to work now and get the monastery ready for it, just in case."

The bell, signalling the end of recreation, rang, silencing Clare as thoroughly as anyone else.

All through the early afternoon the nuns laboured, from prioress to novices—who kept appearing and disappearing in the upper windows like a puppet show, now and then plucked back to safety, with their screwdrivers and hooks, by an alarmed novice-mistress. Ash cans and garbage cans, Mary Agnes' zebra cart, the garden bench, the dryer, even the plaster angel who guarded the door of the Hermitage, were carried into the cellar—with the angel left to protect the collection. Any shutters which seemed insecure, and few did not, were reinforced with extra hooks and catches and braces. Inside the monastery, oil lamps were filled and distributed, until every corner held a shining glass shape, or a fat, white, plumbers' candle, carefully stuck onto a bit of convent crockery.



All that could be done, to make ready, to hold the rickety building down to the earth, was done. Nevertheless, it seemed to Clare quite possible that if the hurricane *did* come, the convent might fly over the city in bits and pieces, dropping here a plaster skull or there a Carmelite. More clearly than ever, she had seen, as she worked, the need for the new monastery. Often, Mary Joseph and she had exchanged disparaging head shakes when a shutter nearly split or a screw failed to hold in ancient wood. Yet, in a way, the building's weaknesses had

been reassuring. The Bishop, when he saw the convent—or for that matter, even the Monsignor—could hardly call it livable. It seemed to her a new monastery was as sure a thing to count on as heaven or hell. Much safer than the vagaries of an unpredictable hurricane, she thought as the bell for Vespers sounded clearly, and, with the other nuns, Clare put away her tools, to go to choir.

Public worship, the chanting of the Office, was to her as beautiful a thing as silent prayer—and today, for once, the two novices were neither lagging behind nor leaping ahead, nor were their markers falling from their Office books and fluttering to the floor like little airplanes. Between the lines of seated nuns, the chant went back and forth on its sustained note, the tones steady, every word pure and unslurred as it should be, bright as the light that lay on the open pages of their books. The choir, hot, heavy-aired, tinged with a faint smell of melting wax from the vigil lamps, was filled with singing voices like a glory of bells.

Halfway through *Lauda, Jerusalem*, the nuns on one side sang, "*Mittit crystallum suum sicut buccelas; ante faciem frigoris ejus quis sustinebit?*"

Those on the other side responded, "*Emittet verbum suum, et liquefaciet ea; flabit spiritus ejus et fluent aquae.*" And suddenly, Clare believed in the wild, wandering hurricane, which she had not quite believed in all day—what had been only a disturbing nuisance, threatening in voices at the turn, became very real. Because the Latin she had just heard sung had meant, "He shall send out His word, and shall melt them; His wind shall blow, and the waters shall run."

Is that foolish of me? she wondered, because the same words were being chanted in other Carmels, all over the world, and in places blazing with sunshine. Yet, nevertheless, it seemed to

have the authority of almost a personal warning; she had selected, and heard, those storm-filled sentences with such a piercing clarity. It was as though a finger had touched her, and a stern voice said, "Be careful, Prioress!"

Those in her charge sang on serenely, secure within their tightened monastery, trusting in their Reverend Mother as amiable sheep trusted in their shepherd.

I will be careful of them, Clare thought, catching up with the chant; for a moment, she had almost lost her place as badly as any novice.

Before they had gone to bed, Clare had given the nuns the usual blessing, "May the Lord God grant thee a quiet night, and final perfection." However, not long before the rattle of the clapper for early rising, the unquiet wind began. Something in the violence of its onslaught, which shook her awake, told Clare that the Weather Bureau, Mrs. Dodd, and *Lauda, Jerusalem* had all been right—the hurricane was approaching. When she had gone to sleep the night had been as still, silent, and motionless as the day had been, but now a giant was beginning to roar into life. She lay on her pallet, between its woollen sheets, and listened. In the deep, lightless dark outside her dark cell the great wind, invisible, determined, was starting. Everything is ready, she thought, with equal determination—and the way to go through it is to live the day within the Rule as though nothing were exceptional; even Sr. Joachim should be sustained by the unfaltering strength of the Rule.

As though a hoarse crow were calling, the clapper rattled past her door. Instantly obedient, she left the narrow bed, knelt and kissed the floor before she switched on the light, wondering, when she turned it on, how long that bright electricity would last. As she washed in the cold water and dressed

quickly, saying the prescribed prayers for each article of clothing, Clare also wondered just how long she could manage to keep the day unexceptional—because there was something in the deep voice outside the walls that said *it* was going to be most exceptional, and beyond the handling of any little Carmelite prioress. But the Lord will help me, she thought, as she opened her door and joined the group of nuns who were moving past in a ghostly silence; already the rising wind had blotted out anything as gentle as the sound of alpargats.

The daylight in the great hall of the monastery was dim. Clare had had the shutters closed after breakfast, and now light came only through the unshuttered windows, on south and west. How it grows! she said to herself, listening; it was as though it were feeding on the fears of the apprehensive city, and the papery debris it was pulling off the streets. While they were in choir, the rain that accompanied the wind like a brother had begun, and now sheets of water ran down the big window at the garden end of the hall. It is going to be a tremendous storm, Clare thought, a monster of a storm, and she picked up the hammer beside the gong and struck two heavy blows; the force she had used made her ears ring with the sound, her wrist ache. None too sure that Mary Joseph could have heard, at that, Clare waited until she saw her coming down the stairs, then preceded Mary Joseph into her office.

The little room was neat as usual, with everything in its proper place and shape, but outside its window already disorder was commencing. The garden that had been picked up and sorted yesterday like a box of silks was beginning to tatter in the wind and rain—twigs were flying, and Mary Agnes' chrysanthemums, straining at their stakes, leaned one way as though they were climbing uphill; suddenly, a few leaves from the apple tree rushed against the glass and stuck there. Clare's

hand upon the pane felt a steady vibration, as though an engine hummed under her fingers—slowly but steadily, the power of the wind was rising.

She turned away and looked at Mary Joseph, who stood waiting. "I'm bothered about our new postulant," Clare said. "I haven't had a phone call from her. I just hope she has sense enough to realize she shouldn't try to come today." But what eighteen-year-old was apt to have a supply of that valuable coin, prudence? It only came later, after you had broken your bones over a few hurdles.

"She's too young to have any sense, Reverend Mother," Mary Joseph said. "I expect she'll get stranded, somewhere between here and home."

"Exactly." Clare looked at a dismal mental picture of Barbara Forbes, bowled by the hurricane wind like a tumbleweed on some rain-spouting street. A prioress was supposed to prevent such disasters, when she could. "I'm going to call her family—if she hasn't already left, I'll stop her."

Her finger was on the dial, the buzzing receiver pressed to her ear, when, against the outer wall of the monastery something struck a savage blow, as though a great spring, stretched to the breaking point, had snapped. Expecting glass to come flashing in on her, she shrank back, but nothing happened—and the uninterrupted wind went on. All that was different was that the buzz had left the telephone like an emerging bee, and the receiver felt dead in her hand; the mysterious life of current, coils and contacts that pulsed in the phone's black body had ceased. Barbara Forbes was now out of reach.

"I can't get her—the phone's gone. Well, it was only to be expected," Clare said in a steady voice, because for a moment Mary Joseph had, surprisingly, turned pale. "You know it always goes in every big blow."

"I thought the wall was coming in," Mary Joseph said,

giving herself a slight shake, as though to shake off that unbecoming reaction. "But when did we ever lose the phone so early in a storm?"

"This time," Clare said. Side by side, they stood looking out at the broken line. Hanging off the wall of the building, the wire lay in a confused heap, crushing Mary Agnes' bed of zinnias like a disorderly black snake. At the far end of the garden, the other part of the snake dangled from the pole and swayed in the wind. Abruptly, half a newspaper sailed up over the monastery wall and scoured across the garden, an apparition from the world that flung itself against the refectory window and died. There was something about the storm that daunted her—the leaning of flowers and bushes in the relentless wind; with no moderation, no pause to breath, they seemed to be trying to flee from the monastery, into the city. Even the thick boughs of the huge apple tree were tossing as helplessly as the smallest bush. A sheet of rain for a moment blotted it all out, leaving only the hollow sound that was beginning to grow like the noise of a fast train nearing, and she turned away.

"It is going to be an awfully bad one," Mary Joseph said soberly.

That was too obvious for conversation, Clare thought. "Did you put Joachim to work with Elias?" She had chosen the sewing room, and the Vestier as Sr. Joachim's companion, because sewing was a calming occupation, and Sr. Elias had a temperament as even as her stitches; if anyone could, she would keep Sr. Joachim from fluttering.

"Yes, Reverend Mother," Mary Joseph said. "Joachim looks like a spook, but she's hard at work."

From the desk, Clare picked up her small notebook. As a monastery's business was a mixture of spiritual and material, its reminders were an odd potpourri. She saw that there were letters to write, bills to pay, nuns' requests for permissions

upon which she must decide—a superior's usual diet. *Sr. R.'s D. of R.* was one item.

"Tell Sr. Raphael to postpone her Day of Recollection," Clare said. Who could be recollected on a day like this? "And the laundry," she added. "The novices had better not do it—Mary Agnes won't want it dripping all over her kitchen." The page ended with three words, firmly underlined, *The Bishop—pray!* For a moment, she listened. Would even postmen be abroad once more, in such roaring and spouting weather?

The early delivery had brought no word from the Bishop, and his greatest virtue, in Mother Teresa's eyes, had been the promptness of his answers—although he always said no, he said it with the speed of light. This time, Clare thought, remembering the power of her letter, he will say yes—but he was so unused to it, it might well take him longer. Nevertheless in spite of her hunger for his answer, she wanted no harm to an innocent postman. "I hope the postman doesn't try to come again today," she said.

"It's remarkable what they get through, Reverend Mother," Mary Joseph said, giving her an understanding look. "And I have been praying very hard about the Bishop."

"Don't weaken!" After all, Bishop Porter might still be in the process of making up his mind, and still open to the influence of prayer, which could bend even a Bishop, like a pussy willow.

"Yes, Reverend Mother," Mary Joseph said, and for a moment they looked at each other, suddenly grave. The storm had summoned their attention, with a sharp acceleration of the wind—its pitch had strained higher still, and the glass in the window was beginning to sound, as though it were a harp; the trembling pane was freckled all over with the small green handkerchiefs of leaves that had stuck to it. As she listened, Clare thought, The tiger is out of the bushes now, and roaring.

"It may be very bad indeed, Mary Joseph. Pray about the storm as well as the Bishop," she said quietly, and they left to take care of their separate duties.

Hour by hour, the swelling hurricane grew wilder and greater outside the walls of the monastery. Lost things from the battered city blew over the walls and into the garden—pulpy sheets of newspapers, an exploded umbrella, the metal sign of a tailor's shop, a woman's feathered yellow hat. Accompanied by the drowning downpour of rain, the scream of the wind rose and continued to rise, until the monastery's corridors and passages, usually blessed with silence, were booming galleries that echoed to the external howl of wind and water.

Yet, hour by hour, the monastery kept steadily to its routine. Nuns examined their consciences, ate their dinners, held recreation in a room whose windows shook angrily, wielded broom and dustcloth and sewing needle, mopped up the water that forced its way through the roof, and trusted in the Lord—although here and there might be a face as pale as Sr. Joachim's.

In choir at Vespers, surrounded by Carmelites whose chanting she could hardly hear, Clare prayed for the monastery. It seemed to her that nothing but the strong hands of God could hold the rickety old building together if the wind continued to rise. Even now, it had become obvious to her that the nuns' straining voices could compete no longer with the storm.

Taking advantage of a place where the prioress would normally make a response, Clare rapped on the back of her chair. "Sisters," she said loudly, "continue the Office in private."

As she spoke, a shutter, somewhere on the upper floors, tore loose and hammered against the wall with a distant crash that made Sr. Joachim leap like a frog.

Clare stood, her lifted hand keeping Mary Joseph seated. The shutter must be latched before it shattered the window, but there was no one upstairs except Sr. Malachy, and she would stay in the Infirmary; the screeching of the hurricane had filled Mother Rosaria's mind with ghosts, and it would not have been safe to leave the old nun alone.

As she closed the door of the choir behind her, Clare looked at the lights with anxious eyes. Some time ago they had been turned on, and they were still on, a bright comfort—but twice, in choir, they had faded to a sick dimness before they burned high again; there was power trouble in the city, and there would be more.

She was hurrying down the hall when the doorbell's shrill ring interrupted the intermittent clatter of the shutter, the steady roar of wind and rain battering roof and walls. Almost at once the choir door opened and Sr. Paul came out, but Clare shook her head and went into the turn room. Was it the postman? She pressed the button that released the lock on the front door. Or some brave friend of Carmelites who was frightened for the nuns?

When she heard footsteps nearing the other side of the wall—wet-sounding, muffled footsteps, as though the shoes on the feet were sodden—she said, in a clear voice, "*Deo gratias.*"

"It's the postman, Sister."

"A terrible day for you to be out!" Taking a packet of letters from the shelf, she put them on the turn, slipped the latch, and spun it around. "Have you had much trouble?"

"Nothing *but* trouble, Sister—the wind knocked me flat, twice. I go off duty soon, thank God." The turn gave its familiar wooden growl and rolled back to her, a solitary letter lying on it, like John the Baptist's head on a platter. "Is all well, here?"

"All well, so far," she said. "A safe journey home."

"It'll be interesting, anyway," he said. "Goodbye, Sister." The postman now became dwindling, wet footsteps, and the front door opened with a sudden shriek of wind and crashed shut again.

At least, Clare thought, if it's that bad, Barbara Forbes certainly won't try to get to the monastery; since the morning, the girl had been in the back of her mind, unreachable, wandering.

With a feeling of relief, she picked up the letter—and then at once her heart pounded. Clare had not needed the light of the bulb high in the ceiling of the turn room; her thumb had recognized the familiar embossed crest, a small rigid circle on the back of the envelope. As ever, the Bishop *had* been prompt. Holding the letter tightly, she took a deep breath and left the room. Carmelite years had trained her to put duty first, self-interest last, and the loose shutter which might cause damage was the duty of the moment. What the Bishop had to say could come only after the shutter had been fixed.

Clare ran quickly up the stairs. As she left the more enclosed and protected lower part of the monastery, a greater sound of the hurricane came down toward her, as though it were an enemy hurrying to meet her. The upper floors seemed to be alive with *vagrant* gusts, tremors, creaking noises. In spite of closed and shuttered windows, the flames of the vigil lights before the statues stained the glass with sullen black smoke as they bobbed in violent draughts.

When Clare opened the door of the Virgin's empty cell, she started back; she thought something had leaped at her, but it was only the dark shutters, once more slamming closed against the window as she entered. Dropping her letter on the chest of drawers, she thrust up the window and reached out after the slatting shutters.

It was like reaching into a waterspout—with such a smother-

ing fierceness that it took her breath, the rain drove at her, and poured down her bare arms, from which the wide sleeves had fallen back, as though a hose had been turned on her. Her habit whipping about her, she struggled to catch the shutters. They fought her as if they were live horses pulling against her hands, and as she battled with them she had an appalling glimpse of the great apple tree. At its base, the earth, that solid, still, and motionless thing, had become alive, like the shutters; all around the tree, in a wide circle, the ground was heaving and moving sluggishly as the tree's huge roots tried to hold it against the roaring wind. Another, half-blinded, look showed her the garden, in which every bush seemed to be fleeing in terror, and the wide-spread city, crouched under a grey, boiling sky where bits of debris sailed like wide birds, and then she had the shutters closed, the window down.

Clare stood panting, surrounded by a smell of damp wool, as she dried her hands and arms and picked off the torn leaves that had clung to her habit. Then she turned on the light, picked up the Bishop's letter, and ripped it open, sure of what she would find.

Because she could not believe it the first time, Clare read the letter twice over. It expressed a warm interest in the welfare of Mother Mary Clare's Carmelites, and said that a new monastery was certainly a wish close to the Bishop's heart. He went on to explain—with an eloquence equal to Clare's—that diocesan funds were low, so that, regretfully, he could not give his permission for a new building at the present time; if the Carmelites proved unable to carry the mortgage, the responsibility would fall upon the diocese, and as shepherd of a large flock he did not consider himself justified in taking such a risk. Moreover, he added, in a sharper tone, Monsignor Roberts had inspected the monastery only two months before, as Mother Clare must remember, and he had the Monsignor's

assurance that it was livable—there was certainly no need to inspect it so soon again. The letter was hopeful that the Lord would provide a new monastery some day, but for the time being, it would be wise to make such repairs as were necessary. It closed with an assurance of the Bishop's prayers for Mother Clare in her new office, and asked for hers in return.

Clare stood trembling, and her hand crushed the stiff letter into a crumpled ball as though it were soft tissue. She was for a moment blind and deaf, the prey of an anger she had not known since she had left the world. An old bishop past his prime and a stupid young monsignor with a hard heart had defeated her. There was nothing left of the new monastery but the agonizing pain of a lost dream. In a motionless silence, she struggled to regain control—to rid herself of that burning anger, to forgive the Bishop and the Monsignor, to find direction again.

At last, with a deep sigh, she smoothed the crumpled letter and slipped it beneath her cincture. I am still Prioress, she said to herself; this shell of a place is still mine to rule, and I must do it. But the anger she had driven out had left behind it an emptiness that seemed, appallingly, to be empty even of God.

She turned off the light and shut the door of the Virgin's cell behind her. At the end of the long hall, the stained-glass window was gloomy and dull, shivering in the buffeting of the wind, and the rain on the glass poured like tears from the hems of the saints' robes, from their eyes. Thinly, through the roar of the storm, she heard Mother Rosaria's voice, as full of hopeless trouble as a child's, crying out in the Infirmary. Clare went down the passage and opened the door.

Larger than the usual cell, the Infirmary's furnishings were no different except for the two hospital beds, with their comfort of linen sheets and pillow cases instead of coarse wool. Sr. Malachy, who had been sitting on the straight wooden chair,

dropped her Office book, and snatched it up again. "Praised be Jesus Christ!" she said, with every evidence of pleasure at seeing company.

"May He be forever praised," Clare said. "How is Mother Rosaria?"

"Oh, not well, Reverend Mother." Shaking her head, Sr. Malachy came to the bedside and looked down at the old nun lying there. "She's eating poorly. And she hears people walking in the halls again."

"Who is outside?" Mother Rosaria asked in a querulous tone, its richness turned reedy with age. "Talking? Walking up and down?"

"No one, dear," Clare said. Lately Mother Rosaria had been hearing the footsteps and voices of Carmelites long dead and gone. "It is only the noise of a storm, Mother." She sat down beside her and took Mother Rosaria's hand. "Only a storm," she said. She remembered, the day she had made her final vows, how strong and firm that hand had been on hers—and now it felt like a delicate framework of weak bones, nothing more. Clare did not ask herself why there was suffering and destruction. She knew. Nevertheless, for a moment, Rosaria lived and spoke in her memory as she once had been, and Clare found it hard to endure.

Mother Rosaria was looking at her with puzzled eyes, as though she was trying to put together the meaning of Clare's face and could not. "Who are you?" she asked, with a feeble indignation. "Who are *you*?" She could remember none of the living, and because she could not, they often made her angry.

"Oh, now, Mother Rosaria," Sr. Malachy said fondly, shaking a finger at Rosaria as if she were indeed a child. "Reverend Mother has come to visit you—you know her well."

Looking at Clare with empty, worried eyes, Rosaria said,

"I don't know you. I don't *want* you." Pulling her hand free of Clare's, she turned her head on the pillow so she need no longer see her.

"Never mind, Malachy," Clare said. "I'd like your charity to go downstairs and get an eggnog for Mother—it would do her good." Malachy meant well, as always, but Clare did not wish to see Rosaria put over hurdles she could not manage.

Left alone with the old nun, Clare sat silently by the bedside. On the unshuttered window, the rain and the wind battered, piecing the glass with leaves and bits of twigs that stuck for a moment before they flew wildly away again. Clare put her head down on her hands and closed her eyes. Like Peter, she thought, I have laboured all the night and have taken nothing.

And suddenly, out of the darkness of the world into which Clare was looking, Mother Rosaria's voice spoke. "Reverend Mother indeed!" it said, with a chuckling note. "Oh, you always like your little joke, Jean. I know."

Startled, Clare opened her eyes. Rosaria was watching her, and now there was recognition in the old face, pleated with wrinkles and as white as the coif that surrounded it. "You have promise, child," she said. "I think so. So does Mother Teresa—and Mother Chrysostom."

She has gone back thirty-two years, Clare said to herself; she knows me, but she does not see the prioress—she sees the postulant. If for only a moment, something in Clare's voice, perhaps, had dispersed some of the confusing clouds and made Rosaria novice-mistress again. Clare ventured to take the old nun's hand once more, and this time it did not reject her.

"Mother," she said, "tell me what to do." Gently, she held the thin, frail hand in hers. "I have lost something I wanted greatly—a good thing, not a bad thing." It was not the collapse of her pride that saddened Clare—the Lord must have thought she needed chastening again, and that was all right.

But the new monastery had gone with it, in the same silent destruction. It did not seem reasonable. Slightly, encouragingly, she pressed the hand in hers. When she had been a postulant, often a word, a sentence, of Rosaria's had shone a splendour of light into a dark corner of Clare's soul. Could she not do it now as well?

The wind was roaring outside, a great squall of threatening sound that seemed to be growing ever larger and wilder. Clare knew that soon she must go, but still she waited. "Mother?" she said.

"Lost something?" the old nun repeated, feebly. The words seemed to alarm her. "Lost something?"

Looking at Mother Rosaria, Clare saw that the mists were closing in again. Rosaria no longer recognized her; instead of the young postulant she had known so well, she saw only a strange middle-aged nun by her side, and was becoming afraid of the stranger—her hand began to struggle in Clare's like a captive. Clare released it and got up as the door opened and Malachy came in. It was time to go.

"Wasn't Reverend Mother kind to visit you?" Malachy said cheerfully, reaching the bedside with her tray, on which jingled a fat glass yellow with eggs and milk. "And now I've brought you a lovely eggnog."

"You're good to her, Sister Malachy," Clare said, and thought, Malachy grows in tact—she had not commented that there were tears in the Prioress' eyes. "As soon as I can, I'll send somebody up to relieve you."

"Thank you, Reverend Mother." Sr. Malachy glanced at Mother Rosaria, who was picking fretfully at the bedclothes. "Somebody she likes, if there's one handy—or she'll make more fuss than the storm."

Clare closed the Infirmary door behind her and stood still in a sudden alarm, listening. From the floor above her had come a

single, tolling not of the great bell. Even as she looked up, another deep, wild note dropped toward her, and another. The sound was erratic, inhuman—the bell was being rung not by hands, but by the immense power of the wind pouring through the open belfry. In time to the uneven clanging, the long, shaggy rope hanging in the stairwell was swaying slowly.

Clare flung herself up the stairs. Other footsteps were running behind her, and she and Mary Joseph arrived on the top floor almost together.

"Oh, Mother!" Mary Joseph cried. "Hear it ring!" Her eyes, staring above her, showed horror of a storm so bad it could sound the great bell.

The door to the stairs had blown open, and at the top of them Clare saw the trap door of the belfry rising and falling, letting in gusts of rain and scooping winds that flung their habits and sleeves. "The trap door, Mary Joseph!" If they did not get it closed, the wind could disembowel the monastery.

They hurried up the wet stairs. For several moments the flapping door fought Clare, until at last she managed to hold it still enough to let Mary Joseph squeeze the latch closed. The



wooden planks were shaking under Clare's grasp—enormous was the power trampling beyond them; above her, the cupola trembled with the shattering sounds of the wind and the bell.

All around her and Mary Joseph, as they ran down the stairs again, the monastery groaned and strained. This last onslaught of wind had torn loose a shutter, and cannon shots seemed to be cracking against the walls. Beyond the window at the end of the hall Clare could see shingles flying from the roof, like brown wings. She knew that with one more acceleration of the storm she would hear the apple tree thunder down in the garden, and the old building itself begin to fly apart, torn to pieces by the savage beak of the wind. It was a moment of trembling equilibrium; one further step and enormous destruction would begin—and now she heard the shrill splintering of glass as the flailing shutter crashed into its window.

"Mary Joseph, the sisters are in choir?" Clare's voice shook. She could not steady it, or quiet her hammering heart. There was something terrifying about the insane scream of the shrieking wind, and the uneven, demented tolling of the bell.

"Yes, Reverend Mother." Once again, Mary Joseph was staring upward, her face pale, toward the cupola.

They are safest in choir, Clare thought. And not only the monastery, but every place where the hurricane's great feet were stamping needed Carmelite prayer. "Quick, Mary Joseph!" she cried, because she had heard another window splinter and scatter.

As they hurried through the booming halls of the monastery, filled now with an uproar that the shattered windows no longer kept out, the building vibrated about them, an orchestra of discords. The lights had gone, as Clare had known they would, and the shadowy corridors rumbled with noise and the lunatic pealing of the bell.

It took them a long time to board the broken windows, sweep up the shattered glass, mop dry the water that had poured through in a tidal wave. When they had finished, Clare said heavily, "We've done all we could." She flexed tired hands, stung by splinter wounds, and brushed at her wet habit; as they had been struggling with the windows, the rain had battered them breathless, soaked them in a saltless ocean.

"Reverend Mother—" Mary Joseph said. Once again they were in the upper hall, and Mary Joseph was looking upward, toward the belfry. She was mopping herself with her brown handkerchief, and her face wore a curiously tentative, probing expression. "I think the bell has stopped."

It seemed to Clare that she had not heard it for some while. The wind still roared savagely, but had its velocity dropped enough so that it could no longer tumble the weight of the bell? Had the moment of equilibrium passed? Perhaps the hurricane was beginning a slow, evil-tempered withdrawal, a sour departure still storming with wind and rain, and clapping shutters, but departure nevertheless.

"Surely it isn't quite so bad," Clare said, and hurried to the nearest window. Still mopping at herself, Mary Joseph came to stand beside her.

"Oh, Reverend Mother!" Mary Joseph wailed. "The Hermitage!"

The garden was a sodden, mud-brown morass of flattened bushes and shattered flowers—of ponds and puddles seethed by the scouring wind as by a comb. The apple tree still stood, but was stripped of half its leaves; it wore a thin, autumnal look. And at the end of the garden the Hermitage, whiteness soiled with mud, had lost most of its roof; the roof hung down to the trampled earth like the skirt of a slattern. Off the monastery itself, great patches of shingles had been ripped and flung all over the garden as though they were playing cards; bits of

glass sparkled in the litter. The wind still tossed and tumbled the things it had pried loose, and onto all the destruction the rain poured endlessly. Before the hurricane, the repairs to the monastery would have left something of the Building Fund with which to begin again, a seed. Now, not a cent would remain—it would all be swept away like Mary Agnes' flowers. In a silence that could find no words, Clare looked at what had once been the garden and the Hermitage. Lord, why have You done this to me? she asked herself, and Him.

Suddenly, from the top of the stairs, Sr. Paul's voice called. "Reverend Mother! Reverend Mother!"

She was hastening down the corridor toward Clare and Mary Joseph. The little Carmelite who never forgot proper decorum was almost running; her hands waved in the air.

"Reverend Mother!" she cried again, as she reached them. Her eyes were a blue blaze of excitement. "She is here—she is *here!*"

Clare looked at her. "*Who* is here, Sister Paul?" she said.

Sr. Paul became recollected at once. Her hands fled under her scapular, and she knelt quickly. "The new postulant, Reverend Mother."

"It isn't possible," Clare said. A strong man would have had difficulty making his way through that seething wind, that rain of roofs and treetops—how could it have been done by a thin reed of a girl?

"Yes, Reverend Mother," Sr. Paul agreed, with great respect. "But she *is* here. And she's waiting to enter."

Clare stared at the nun kneeling before her. She was thinking not of Sr. Paul, but of a young girl so filled with ardour that the rage of a hurricane had not been enough to stop her. And she was suddenly, profoundly, illumined by a shaming light. She understood now why she had lost her monastery. The Lord had chosen a new postulant to teach a new prioress something

she had needed to learn—that Carmel did not live and grow by the splendour of its monasteries.

“Sister Paul,” she said, “call the nuns to the community room!”

Assembled in the big room, so dimly lighted by its oil lamps and bobbing candle flames, the nuns waited in silence and excitement, their veils lowered, except for the Prioress’. Outside the groaning shutters, the wind roared by the walls and rain spouted and splashed from flooded gutters.

There was a distant sound of bolts being withdrawn and thudding back into place again. In a few moments the door of the community room opened and Sr. Alberta entered. Behind her, carrying a rain-darkened suitcase, walking on high-heeled shoes that made pulpy noises, came the new postulant. She was so extremely wet that Sr. Alberta might have fished her out of a river—water was dripping slowly from the hem of her soaked clothes, dropping from the small grey hat, like a drowned rabbit, clutched in her hand.

As the girl walked toward her at that worldly gait which the novice-mistress would begin to change tomorrow, Clare smiled encouragement. She must be very frightened, Clare thought. She had come through the fury of a hurricane. And she had ended up in a dim room full of fluttering shadows and women with veils lowered against her—knowing that with these forbidding-looking strangers she had cast her lot.

In response to Sr. Alberta’s firm gesture, Barbara, a bundle of damp awkwardness, slipped to her knees before Clare, and she put her hand on the girl’s head in blessing; under her fingers the soft young hair felt like the warm feathers of a wet bird.

When Clare raised her hand, Barbara looked up at her. She was trembling, but there was no cloud of fear in her dark eyes—they were brilliant with excitement and delight.

Another, Clare thought—hopefully at the beginning of the long, arduous, magnificent road of Carmel. Another, like me, to be hammered and shaped on the ringing anvil of the Lord. She lifted the girl up into her arms.

“Welcome to Carmel!” she said gaily. “I wish you much joy!”



